

SEMINARS FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

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Introduction

Between June and November 1979 a series of seminars was held for newly elected Members of Parliament and their staffs. The idea for the seminars arose from a variety of considerations. First was the anticipation that after the 1979 general election, as after previous elections, there would be many new MPs. As it happened 107 of the 282 MPs elected in May had not been Members of the previous Parliament and most of them had never served in any Parliament. At the same time the work of an MP has, over the years, grown more demanding and, in parallel, support services have proliferated. Setting up offices and learning how to make best use of the available services has become a complex business. Increasingly, newly elected MPs have been suggesting that a training or orientation program of some sort would have been helpful.

There was also the thought that while Parliament is a partisan place where learning the job often occurs within the bounds of party, it would be useful to have an initial all-party gathering to share ideas and experience. This was a basic element throughout the planning of the seminars. And it was an objective from the outset for the seminars to put the spotlight on the individual backbench M.P. While the media would focus on the new government and opposition leadership, we hoped to encourage discussion of the role, both actual and potential, of Members of Parliament.

These purposes were shared by an all-party group of veteran MPs and ex-MPs who came together as the sponsors for the seminars. With their support and prestige, a secretariat from the Parliamentary Centre proceeded with the details of planning.

Seminar One (June 6-7) "The Immediate Decisions"

The main purpose of the first seminar was to provide the earliest possible opportunity following the election for new MPs to get advice and information on the many practical decisions about the staffing and organization of their Ottawa and constituency offices, the best use of the various services of Parliament and possible adjustments in family and personal life. Because of the importance of family considerations in our MPs' careers we made a special point of inviting spouses to attend as observers. At the same time the programme included a discussion of the MP's role in the Canadian parliamentary system. To guarantee that the seminar would be of practical value, we invited veteran MPs, Officers of Parliament and other experienced staff people as our speakers and discussants.

Considering that the letter of invitation was mailed to the home addresses of newly elected Members only seven days before the seminar opened, the response was remarkable. Registration showed that 88 of the 107

newly elected MPs attended the sessions, the vast majority throughout the two days; 53 of the 62 Progressive Conservatives, 25 of the 30 Liberals, and 10 of the 14 NDPs attended. Of the 19 who did not attend, 8 had been elected to an earlier Parliament. There was a good mixture of English and French-speaking Members. We were also delighted by the large number of spouses - about three-quarters of the total - who accompanied their husbands or wives. One of the few Parliamentary husbands inquired whether he could join the Parliamentary Wives Association and was assured of a welcome.

The first seminar illustrated clearly the value of meetings like this. There was the social benefit of welcoming new Members to Parliament. From remarks throughout the two days, it was clear that this was very much appreciated. Complimenting that welcome was the all-party nature of the gathering which gave new Members a chance of extending their acquaintanceship - and perspectives - at the outset of a new Parliament. The spirit was conveyed by one of the panelists, when he said that "no matter what party we belong to, we are first and foremost parliamentarians and representatives of the people of Canada".

The seminar was, above all else, a useful source of information. One participant who had been in the 29th Parliament remarked that he could have saved a couple of months of unproductive work and frustration when Parliament first met if he had had a similar opportunity to learn the organization and services of Parliament. Beyond information, there was the benefit of shared experience. It was reported that as a result of remarks by a veteran MP's wife, three wives in the audience decided on the spot not to stay in the constituency, but to move to Ottawa. It is rare for anyone to accomplish such immediate results on Parliament Hill.

From the point of view of the various parliamentary officials, the seminar was an opportunity to communicate their basic message to many new Members and, by so

doing, to save themselves considerable time and trouble. Throughout the planning of the seminars, the sponsoring group and the secretariat were given strong support by senior officials on the Hill, including the Clerk, the Sergeant-at-Arms and the Director of Personnel and Administration. This was a key element in the program's success.

The icing on the cake was that the seminars attracted a good deal of attention from the media. The typical story line read - "School for New MPs", an analogy developed by one of the new MPs in an interview. "Coming to Parliament is like your first day in school. You learn where your desk is, where the bathroom is and who your friends and enemies are going to be".

Seminar Two (October 2-3) "The Job of MP"

Greatly encouraged by the response to the first seminar, the sponsoring group proceeded to hold a second, shortly before the opening of Parliament. Whereas the first had focused on immediate practical decisions, the second explored major aspects of the MPs job - in the House, in committees, the use of research and so on. Because of interest expressed by new MPs, a second day was devoted to the organization and functioning of the system of government in Ottawa within which MPs would operate.

A highlight of this program was the opening session held in the House Chamber itself so as to give new MPs and their spouses a feeling for this new working environment. The then Speaker of the House, the Hon. James Jerome, spoke informally about his role and the do's and don'ts of Question Period. He explained that while the Rules of the House might read like a series of "don'ts", his purpose was to facilitate debate and the effective questioning of the Government by Opposition Members.

The discussion of committee work and the use of research returned repeatedly - as had the first seminar - to the importance of Members concentrating their energies on a few issues and not "spreading themselves too thin". The great danger in Ottawa, it was said, was that of being swamped by information, or as one panelist put it: "For most of the work that you do here there is far more information available than you will ever be able to use. You have to know enough about the subject to be the master of it yourself". The impression was that the new MPs were intensely interested in this discussion since it related directly to matters which would bear on their immediate effectiveness.

The second day of the program on the organization and functioning of the federal government was somewhat heavier-going. In a short period of time, the program attempted to describe both the system - which is large and complex - and the legislative process - which is long and complex. One of the panelists announced the theme early in the discussions by quoting the latest Ottawa aphorism. "Anyone who understands what is going on is badly informed". But even this immersion in the complexities of Ottawa was appreciated by the new MPs. As one remarked, while such information might not be useful immediately, it would probably prove very helpful in the months ahead. The audience was particularly interested in a description of how the apparently simple act of drafting a law blossoms with legal and political difficulties.

Besides the program itself, a reception was given by the City of Ottawa for the new MPs and their spouses. Officials of the various area municipalities of Ottawa-Hull were invited as well as representatives of local school boards. This very pleasant occasion at City Hall was both a warm welcome to their new home away from home for Members of Parliament from every part of Canada as well as an opportunity to acquire information about housing, education and so on. The intensity of some of the discussions suggested that a certain amount of politics also took place.

Once again the seminar attracted media attention although the story line this time tended to dwell on the somewhat lower attendance. "MPs Play Hooky Already", read one headline. In fact, considering that this was in no way an official or obligatory event and that Members were very busy as the Opening of Parliament approached, registration was quite good; 69 of the 107 newly-elected MPs attended all or part of the program and once again there was good representation from all parties. All in all, this first experiment in providing an orientation program for MPs was a success.

Staff Seminars

The story does not end there. Toward the end of the second seminar Members expressed interest in a program for their staff. This reflected MPs' recognition of the growing importance of staff to their effectiveness and the fact that many staffers, like MPs, were new to their jobs. One Parliamentary official estimated that in the first six months after 1979 the General Election there had seen some 1,000 staff changes on the Hill, a figure approaching an average of 3 per Member! While many of those were people moving from one office to another, many others were staff with no previous experience on the Hill.

Following discussions with experienced staffers, it was decided to hold the seminars on Monday and Wednesday mornings, the most convenient times (because of MPs travel and party caucuses) for staff to be out of the office. With the individual MP again as the focus and drawing on experienced staffers and Parliamentary Officials as panelists, the program was organized in 3 segments: "The MP's Office", "Relations on the Hill" and "Case Work and Dealing with the Civil Service".

"The MP's Office" began with the importance of staff adjusting to the individual MP, his/her needs, interests and work style. An experienced staffer reminded the audience "You may be interested in pursuing

your own interests here but remember that your job is to help your boss, the MP". From there the discussion turned to the basic tasks in all offices of establishing a routine and agenda, managing the flow of correspondence and information and defining "who does what" in the office. A theme repeated frequently was that no matter what the "system" (and there are as many as there are MPs) any good staffer has to be prepared to do any job at a moment's notice. At the same time there was some controversy about the relative positions and prerogatives of secretarial and research staff.

The second morning was devoted to "Relations on the Hill", that network of Parliamentary services, the knowledge and utilization of which determines in no small part the effectiveness of the Member's staff. The program was a parade of rather brief presentations by Parliamentary officials followed by questions. Discussion ranged from the Speakers office to the Messenger Service with many stops between. The underlying themes here were 'Who to know for What' and how to deal with Parliamentary officials. From all indications new staffers found the morning very helpful.

The third and final segment of the program was "Case Work and Dealing with the Civil Service". This was intended to cover the various facets of the MP's role in assisting constituents, ranging from the plain supplying of information to the sometimes

quite complicated "ombudsman's" job of seeking redress of grievances. The opening general discussion produced the interesting observation that whereas new MPs tend to be conscious of whose constituents seek help with what problems - preferring, for example, to pass on provincial problems to provincial representatives - experienced MPs accept all the business that comes their way. As one staffer put it "If they write a letter, we help".

The program then turned to a number of the heaviest case work areas such as unemployment insurance, immigration and taxation, with officials from the relevant Departments or Minister's offices making brief statements and answering questions. As one staffer put it, apart from conveying basic information, these presentations, "helped put a face on the officials we deal with".

As with the seminars for MPs, we were enormously encouraged by the turnout at the staff seminars. We estimated that well over 200 staffers attended each of the first two mornings and perhaps two-thirds of that number attended day three. The reason for this interest is not hard to find. As work loads and specialization grow in Parliament - as in other institutions - the need to share ideas and experience grows as well. One participant summed it up very well; "Parliament must learn to be a place where people can learn".