
Representing Pluralistic Constituencies

Devinder Shory MP

Canada is a large, diverse nation with regions that possess a variety of ethnic and cultural identities. The presence of this peaceful mosaic is one of the cornerstones that makes Canada unique. This article looks at the particular challenge of representing diverse cultural communities.



Whether you were born here, or came as a new immigrant, Canada opens her arms to those who are willing to work hard and play by the rules.

In my home city of Calgary, Alberta, we are no different. With a population of just over 1 Million, Calgary holds an ethnic minority base of over 237,000. One only has to drive through my riding of Calgary Northeast to recognize that many of these groups fall within my constituency limits. I am one of these visible minorities.

According to Statistics Canada in 2006, 11.1% of the people in Calgary Northeast identified Punjabi as the number one language spoken in their household. 22.6% identified themselves as South Asian, 6% as Chinese, 4.9% as Filipino, 3.3% as Southeast Asian and 2.6% as Latin American. In fact, 48.5% of constituents in Calgary Northeast identify themselves as visible minorities, and 37% are immigrants to Canada.

While I have only been a Member of Parliament since the most recent General Election in 2008, with a riding as diverse as mine, I hope to be able to provide some perspective from what I have experienced in the last two years and present a few themes to promote discussion.

While it is certainly not always the case, there is at least one thing that all politicians do agree on. Regardless of our political stripes or individual roles within our respective parties, we all have an ultimate

obligation to our constituencies; the duty to represent the interests, attitudes and beliefs of those who granted us the privilege of holding their trust in public office. Whether in Government or Opposition, we all have a duty to be the voice for our constituents in Parliament.

Firstly, it must be recognized that there is no absolute or concrete answer on how to represent a constituency that holds a variety of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Every constituency has a different ethnic make-up, collection of beliefs and attitudes, and varying needs and interests. To be accurate, there is no 'one size fits all' approach. We must do the best we can based on our good judgment.

For the purpose of providing ideas for discussion, I will focus on two main themes that I feel are at the heart of representing a pluralistic constituency; 'Accessibility' and 'Promoting an Open Dialogue'.

How does one overcome the challenges in representing a multitude of interests, opinions and attitudes reflecting various ethnic and cultural backgrounds?

First and foremost, one needs to approach a pluralistic constituency with an attitude of honesty and trust, and promote an open, two-way dialogue. In practice, this involves reaching out to all individuals and groups in the community and allowing them the opportunity to present their interests and priorities. This means engaging respective community leaders, attending community association meetings, taking part in community events, and actively participating

Devinder Shory represents Calgary Northeast in the House of Commons. This is an edited version of his presentation to the Eighth Canadian Parliamentary Seminar held in Ottawa from October 17-23, 2010.

in local forums for discussion.

In these efforts, however, you must be open to new ideas, new concepts and new values that you yourself may not be interested in, or even agree with. As well, we must always be open to criticism. With honest relationships will come honest criticism and, as anyone in the job will tell you, you better be prepared for it.

As such, this duty also involves facilitating a dialogue between converging interests. We must aim to unite and not divide. It is imperative not to pit any groups or individuals against each other, but rather to help find common ground and encourage compromises between competing parties.

Once we have established the need to reach out and promote dialogue, we must recognize that not all groups and individuals within a pluralistic constituency receive messages the same way or get their information through the same mediums. In this light, it is the MP's duty to accommodate these differences and provide equal accessibility to all.

This involves such simple actions as taking the time to correspond to others in their native language. For instance, in one part of my Riding Office, 9 times out of 10, the person answering the phone can also speak

Punjabi, Hindi, or a variety of other languages and dialects.

As well, you must be proactive in discovering what resources such as newspapers, television and electronic sources that the groups within your constituency can, and actually do, access. The dialogue must start somewhere and it is up to us to deliver our messages in ways that speak to those we represent.

The themes of promoting an open dialogue, and providing equality in access, along with the examples I have just given, are by no means the totality of what it takes to represent a pluralistic constituency.

Each riding presents different challenges and there is no simple answer. However, it is our duty as elected officials to continue to strive for new opportunities to better represent those who put their trust in us.

I would like to close with a fitting quote from Sir Isaiah Berlin:

Pluralism: that is, the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other.