
No Independent Office Space: the PEI Experience

Interview with Paula Biggar, MLA

Members of the Legislative Assembly in Canada's smallest province are not provided with a budget to establish their own constituency offices. Instead, as Deputy Speaker Paula Biggar explains, backbench MLAs must do constituency work and hold meetings in a variety of locations including their offices in the capital buildings, local government-run information access centres, libraries, coffee shops or even in their own homes. Biggar notes that while PEI MLAs are the lowest paid in the country, they tend to be, and are expected to be, the most accessible to constituents.



CPR: Constituency offices seem to have developed haphazardly across Canada over the past 40 to 50 years and are now well-established in many jurisdictions. Why do you think Prince Edward Island has not adopted them for provincial politics?

Paula Biggar: Backbench MLAs in PEI do not have budgets to run constituency offices. Prince Edward Islanders feel the cost to run an office is not warranted due to accessibility to their local representative. There is somewhat of an expectation that the MLA should be available other than just at an office; for example, constituent meetings take place at coffee shops, by phone, at the MLA's home or at the constituent's home. Most MLAs in PEI adhere to these expectations of accessibility.

CPR: What sort of alternate arrangements have been made for MLAs who may be doing casework in their constituency? Do different MLAs have different practices?

Biggar: Most MLAs have access to office space in their constituency in an already established government site such as a library or Access PEI offices – a single location where the public can access provincial government services, programs and information. MLAs have access to a phone at these places, but no office staff is provided for them. Cabinet Ministers are provided a budget for an Executive Assistant to assist with constituent inquiries, however. Some MLAs are provided space in the community free of charge to hold office meetings once a week at the local municipal office. I also hold office hours at an alternate location in an office at a government site. On occasion I do have constituents come to my home or I meet with them at a coffee shop.

Each MLA sets up constituency space to reflect their own area. Backbench MLAs also have an office space provided at the Capital where our legislature is located and share office space in the Government Members' Office. For those of us who represent rural areas, these offices are most used when the legislature is in session, while those from Charlottetown tend to use this space as their main office. Each office is generally shared with a mix of rural and urban MLAs, so this arrangement works well.

CPR: Are MLAs permitted to use their legislative office expense budgets for work they may need to do elsewhere (i.e. Renting meeting space, travel within the constituency, expenses from a home office)?

Paula Biggar, Liberal MLA for District 23 (Tyne Valley-Linkletter), was first elected in 2007. In addition to being Deputy Speaker, she is Chair of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Environment, Energy, and Forestry, and sits on Committees for Public Accounts, Fisheries and Rural Development, Community and Intergovernmental Affairs, and Legislative Management Committee, as well as the Ministerial Committee for the Island Community Fund.

Biggar: There is no budget provided for backbench MLAs to travel within the constituency for meetings with constituents or to rent meeting space. There is also no budget for backbench MLAs to do any advertising, sponsor any local event, etc. Any event tickets, donations, or lunches with constituents are a personal expense which each MLA takes out of their own salary. MLAs can expense travel from their ridings to the capital up to five times per month when we're not in session and travel can be claimed when we attend meetings for a standing committee. Travel to the capital is covered daily if the legislature is in session. If we stay overnight in the capital during the sitting of the session it is at our own expense as a backbencher. Office supplies such as stamps, printer paper, and business cards are provided by the Government Members' Office.

Backbench MLAs are provided with phone and fax lines at their home and a monthly Internet deduction on their home Internet connection through the Legislative Assembly. Each MLA is provided with a cell phone and a call package paid by the Government Members' Office, unless they are identified as personal calls. Each month, backbench MLAs must sign the statement sent to government members in regard to use of phone line at their home office and calls placed to declare nature of the call. If the calls are of a personal nature then the members have to pay them back.

CPR: Federal MPs in PEI have constituency offices. Is there any cooperation in terms of allowing MLAs to use this space for provincial work? Do some MLAs wish to have this system in place provincially?

Biggar: There is no affiliation between federal offices and no use of MP office space or other federal offices by any provincial MLA. Due to the potential to confuse the roles and responsibilities of federal and provincial elected officials I do not think it would be a good idea to share the same space.

CPR: Does the absence of a constituency office in an MLA's riding tend to make him/her more likely to remain in the capital to work or to focus more on legislative business as opposed to constituent casework?

Biggar: The present system generally provides access to constituents at a local level to backbench MLAs. However, a travel, advertising, or event budget would help make the role of backbench MLAs more equitable with their cabinet colleagues. Cabinet Ministers have access to an operational budget and resources that assist their constituency. There is a perception by local constituents that all PEI MLAs receive the same benefits as Cabinet Ministers (i.e. a car with a gas card, meals, etc.). We need to educate the public more. Generally the public feel that MLAs are overpaid and they do not give credence to the hours required for an MLA to effectively carry out our role or the need to have this kind of budget in order to work.

CPR: What could other jurisdictions learn from the PEI experience when it comes to how MLAs handle constituency work and representation?

Biggar: PEI elected officials are the lowest paid in the country. In discussions with other provincial officials they are very surprised at the fact that backbench MLAs also have no operating budget. Recent events, with regard to misuse of funds in other constituencies across Canada, have made it very difficult to move forward as the perception is that these budgets are misused and parliamentarians are unaccountable for their spending.

Our MLAs are, notably, the most accessible and the expectation for us to be accessible 24/7 is not uncommon on PEI. As each jurisdiction has different budgetary situations I believe governments must all work to be equitable and fair not only to our constituents but also to our elected officials.