
Under One Roof: Federal and Provincial Parliamentarians Share Constituency Office Space

Interview with Gilles Bisson, MPP

MPP Gilles Bisson represents a large Northern Ontario riding. To maximize his access to constituents in geographically dispersed communities he began sharing office space with two of his federal colleagues. In this interview, Bisson describes the many benefits of this arrangement for his constituents and how staff members in each office manage their casework flow.



CPR: How did you first come up with the idea of combining constituency offices with these two members (Carol Hughes and Charlie Angus)?

Gilles Bisson: When I was elected as a New Democrat in 1990 it seemed to make a lot of sense to me to try to

find a way to share space because constituents would come in the door with an issue and not have an idea of whether it would be federal or provincial. And what would often happen is that they came to the provincial office, they spent time telling their story and then it would turn out to be a federal issue. And I would have to send them down to the federal member's office. And at the time we couldn't do it because he was locked into a lease and the space couldn't accommodate two offices. So I always had it in the back of my head, and

when I asked Charlie Angus to run along with Jack Layton, one of the things I talked to him about was that should he be elected we should put our offices together. In fact, he ran on that as part of his platform and it was fairly popular. People understood it was a one-stop shop: you came to one door, you got the answers, nobody could pass the buck.

CPR: Are you aware of other parliamentarians with similar arrangements?

Bisson: Most people won't do it for a host of reasons. First of all, you have to be in the same political party. It wouldn't make sense to share it with a member of the opposite party. But there many other reasons which come into play. There could be lease arrangements which make it impractical. In other cases there might be members who just want to do their own thing. But there's not a lot of appetite to do this because it does take a fair amount of effort on the part of both the federal and provincial members. And it's also a bit of a task for the staffs as well. So it's not something most people would like to do, but it works for us here, it's our brand and people in our constituencies are pretty used to it. But I think most members would be hard-pressed to do it.

CPR: Can you give an example of how this "one stop shopping" arrangement has helped constituents?

Bisson: Just the other night I got a call on my cell phone from someone in my northern constituency with Carol Hughes. She has an insurance problem and a CRA (Canada Revenue Agency) problem. She's a

Gilles Bisson is the House Leader for Ontario's New Democratic Party. First elected in 1990, the MPP for Timmins-James Bay operates two full-time constituency offices which are shared with NDP MPs Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay) and Carol Hughes (Algoma-Manitoulin-Kapuskasing) in Timmins and Kapuskasing, respectively, and holds regular office hours in the communities of Hearst, Constance Lake and Smooth Rock Falls.



Members of the Bisson-Angus Timmins constituency office staff in the boardroom after a team meeting: (from left) Dale Tonelli, federal constituency assistant (CA); Cheryl Counter, volunteer; André Grzela, provincial CA; Tina Chartrand, provincial CA; Sue Cardinal, federal CA; Lise Beaulne, federal CA.

small businessperson and the dogs are coming in on her and putting her in a position where she'll probably have to close her business in a couple of weeks if this doesn't get resolved. So she had both a federal and provincial issue: the insurance issue was provincial and the CRA issue is federal. So this morning I called my staff at my Kapuskasing office to see what we could do for them. And so, one person will take on the file but deal with both parts of it. Often, the beauty with that is they're connected in some way. The CRA issue is connected to the insurance issue, as well, and it's best if the staff person following up with that constituent is familiar with both and versed in both. It just makes it a lot easier to deal with. From the constituent's point of view you don't have to waste time telling your story to two different offices. And if it comes to a point where it's nearing completion and one office is handling it differently than another office, it may cause problems when it comes to a resolution. This is a fairly powerful thing for your constituents, but it takes a certain amount of work on the part of the staff and members to make it work.

CPR: How do you handle the issue of dividing expenses between jurisdictions?

Bisson: Basically we split everything in half. We've made arrangements with our service providers to split our bills in half, so one member pays one half and the other member pays the other half. In other cases there may be a trade off: one member will pick up a bill for something that's \$100 a month and the other will pick up the bill on something else comparable. But most service providers have been good in allowing us to split our bills that way.

CPR: Does this help to keep down costs, or are you able to provide a greater level of service?

Bisson: What most people don't know is that members have not had an increase in their office budgets for years now, especially on the provincial side, but also on the federal side. So it allows you to have a bit of savings so that you have a bit of a buffer. It's allowed us to have a little bit more staff in terms of reception, but most of it goes into providing a buffer so that you're able to absorb the increase in hydro and the increase in everything else going on these days. Most of us have multiple offices, especially here in Northern Ontario. It's not like some downtown Toronto ridings where you have one constituency office. I run two full-time constituency offices, Charlie

runs two full-time constituency offices, and Carol runs two full-time constituency offices. Plus we have our clinics on top of that because the ridings are so large. Most of the money goes to paying mileage for staff to go from Point A to Point B or for cell phones or computers and such.

CPR: How do you handle staffing issues? Do you delegate responsibility? Are there times when one MP has a heavier workload than another?

Bisson: I've been managing it with Charlie ever since he was elected – he's been elected over 10 years now – and there's been some adjustment because my staff were used to doing things in a certain way, and it took some time to work out a relationship, but we've managed to work it out. And with workload, it balances out. Take my office with Carol Hughes. Over there I have two staff and she has one, so obviously my people are taking on a bit more, but overall it balances out in the end and it depends on the kind of work you do. Generally provincial politics tends to touch people more directly than federal politics. We get everything from workers' compensation, to loan applications to quarry permits because the provincial government tends to have much more direct contact with people in terms of matters which affect their daily lives.

CPR: When you say that you have two workers in that office and Carol Hughes has one, does this mean you do individual hiring?

Bisson: Oh yes, everyone has to be on an individual member's payroll. But what we try to do is to divvy up the casework in a way that makes sense. In Kapuskasing the staff there have resisted strict divisions between federal and provincial files, so there is a bit of cross-over work there because that's what they have found works well for them based on the volume of casework. In the Timmins office they prefer a bit more of a defined federal-provincial division and that seems to work well there. So it depends on the individuals.

CPR: Is this something you've talked to other MPs and MPPs about in terms of the merits of this system?

Bisson: I have talked to people, especially at the beginning when this was put in place, but also during the last election cycle when some of them approached me with questions. But what I've said is that it's not for everyone. If you're a newly elected member and you're thinking about this there are a number of things you need to consider. First, if there's an existing member in the

"People understood it was a one-stop shop: you came to one door, you got the answers, nobody could pass the buck."
~ Gilles Bisson

other jurisdiction, are they locked into a lease and if so, can their office accommodate you and your staff? Not all existing members may necessarily want to team up. And of course the other member would need to be from the same party. Don't get me wrong, I've had good working relationships with MPs from another party during some of my time in office, but trying to combine office space and sharing staff with someone who has a different political philosophy about how things should be done would be very difficult, if not impossible.



Dale Tonelli and Emilia Duguay, a co-op student from Timmins High School, verify passport applications at the front desk.

CPR: Do you have any final thoughts about this topic you'd like to share that didn't come up during the course of this interview?

Bisson: I think one of the most positive things about this setup is that it requires you to have excellent communication with your colleagues from the other jurisdiction; so much so that it's been very beneficial to know what's happening elsewhere. We tend to

keep each other in the loop. And it also allows us to easily cover more terrain in our ridings and speak to matters if the member from another jurisdiction can't be present. We all get invited to events and we can't always attend based on work schedules, so this close communication allows us to cover off for each other or bring some prepared remarks for another member if they can't be present.



Top: Volunteers Ed Stecewicz and Cheryl Counter discuss issues of concern in the riding in the main entrance of the office.
Bottom: Lise Beaulne on the phone in her office speaking to a constituent.