
A Constituency of Millions: “Elected” Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office

Interviews with Senator Doug Black and Senator Betty Unger

Unlike Members of Parliament who are elected to well-defined constituencies, it's unusual for Canadian Senators to operate constituency offices in their efforts to represent their home provinces/regions. Former Senator Bert Brown of Alberta, who was appointed to the Senate after a province-sponsored election process, ran an office in Calgary as a part of his efforts to be an active representative to the people of his province; but in separate interviews with the Canadian Parliamentary Review, two current “elected” Senators from the province, Senators Doug Black and Betty Unger, suggest they prefer to employ alternatives to a stationary physical space in their outreach and consultations.

Senator Doug Black



CPR: Senators do not usually have constituency offices. As an “elected” Senator with a direct mandate from your constituents, do you feel a particular need to have something like a constituency office to represent constituents and communicate with them?

Doug Black: Unlike a Member of Parliament or a Member of the Legislative Assembly in the respective province, my constituency

is a complete province, which in the case of Alberta, is just over four million people. As you know we have six Senators for four million people. I am an elected Senator, and I was fortunate that in that election I won 83 or 84 of the 87 (provincial) constituencies in the province. So I have constituents in literally every city, town and hamlet in Alberta. I take my responsibility to be in touch with my constituents seriously, and it's a daily responsibility in one way or another. So the question becomes, would an office assist that? My view is no. The whole concept of a physical space is an old paradigm particularly when you're dealing with a province the size of Alberta. Where would I locate my office? What I have done is maintain a very active website and a very active social media presence. We are also doing regular online surveys. So we're asking my constituents what they think and they are responding, there's no doubt about that. I'm always soliciting people's views. Secondly, I'm in regular touch with the Alberta media and we also have good relationships with the cultural community media. So as we're reaching out to people they know that Senator Black is active. And finally, I maintain an active travel schedule in Alberta. Just this past weekend I spoke at a French school in Calgary, met with the mayor of Banff, attended the Winter Games, so I'm very active and I'm seen to be active and seen to be around. So in terms of outreach I have absolutely no sense that an office would assist that.

Senator Doug Black finished in first place in the 2012 Alberta Senate Nominee Election. Appointed to the Senate on January 25, 2013, he is also Senior Counsel at Dentons Canada LLP, a global law firm, and was named as one of Canada's 25 most influential lawyers for 2012 by Canadian Lawyer Magazine. Senator Betty Unger campaigned as a Reform Party Senate Nominee in 1998 and was elected by Alberta voters in the 2004 Provincial/Senatorial Election. Appointed to the Senate on January 6, 2012, she founded and operated a medical services company with offices in Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary.

CPR: Is there anything in place of an office that would help with this type of outreach?

Black: If I could have an individual who worked for me whose job was to do daily outreach in the province that would be fabulous. But that person wouldn't work from an office; that person would work from a car and be moving through Alberta every week. I would love to do that, but there's no money for it.

CPR: There has been a lot of discussion about Senate reform recently and debate about the role and purpose of this chamber. Have you talked about this idea for a

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budget for outreach staff with your colleagues as a part of these discussions?

Black: You know, I haven't talked about that idea, but it is one that I will talk about. But in this current environment the last thing that a Senator is going to get is more money. Another option would be to get funding from a think tank or a corporation or organization to support that initiative which would be possible, potentially. But again, in this particular environment it would be fraught with a little bit of difficulty. I think we have to let waters calm a bit before that discussion. Another option would be to use the funds that I have for my Ottawa office and divert some of them to hire a staff member there. But that would not be very helpful because the job that I have to do is here in Ottawa, so I need the staff I have here with me.

CPR: Your colleagues in the House of Commons do have constituency offices, and sometimes they have more than one. In your discussions with them, have there been any broader discussions about these institutions as access points to government and whether they need any reforms?

Black: I come to my perspective as a Senator, but the role of a Member of the House of Commons is much different. First, the geographic area they represent is much smaller. Even in parts of Alberta where constituencies are larger, you can drive from one end to another in half a day. So you can manage to travel.

Certainly in the urban constituencies you can take a bus. Second, constituents for MPs will reach out to them with their passport problems, their immigration problems, their Revenue Canada problems; Senators get less of that. So I think there are strong reasons why a Member of Parliament would want an office. If you live in a constituency you can take the bus, or a car, or skateboard and visit your MP's office – this is not possible for an elected Senator from a province unless you're lucky enough to live next door to the strip mall where my office would be.

CPR: Do you have any other final thoughts on this topic?

Black: The key point for me is connectivity. That's what I worry about every day and that's what my staff worries about every day. How are we connected and how are we relevant to Albertans? The question then becomes, what tools do we need to maintain this connectivity and how do we best deploy them? Do I need a physical office to do this in this particular role? No, I would say I do it through social media, news media, the cultural media and my travel agenda – and it seems to be working. We track things like social media use and my stats on these sites seem to be improving month over month. So that is a good sign.

Senator Betty Unger



CPR: The Senate does not normally provide funding for constituency offices. Are these offices something that Senators might need?

Betty Unger: If you were going to establish a constituency office then funding is definitely something you would need: for rent, for phones, for a staff person. Although I haven't used all my budget, a second office would make a significant dent in my budget.

CPR: As a Senator who was selected as a provincial nominee through an electoral process, is a constituency office something that you would need to make contact with the people you represent?

Unger: In my two years in the Senate, there hasn't been a request for which I've said 'Oh gee, I wish I would have had an office so I could have dealt with this'. When I'm at home I attend as many public events as

possible, right across the province, to meet with people. If someone says they'd like to talk to me I often suggest coffee and usually that's a good option. So from time to time I meet with people at a mutually agreeable place and sometimes these coffee meetings can be as long as two and a half to three hours! I can also suggest lunch appointments from time to time, if it is appropriate. But not having a constituency office has not been an issue.

The best example I could give you was in 2012 when Senators were each given 30 Diamond Jubilee medals to present. I had a small panel of people at home in Edmonton who were receiving all the applications and processing them. I would consult with them from here (Ottawa) or when I went home we would have meetings. One of the people on the panel works for a company that has a small boardroom which became the logical place to meet because it was convenient for all of us. We went through the entire process, which stretched over the summer, and there was no need for me to have a constituency office. Again, it wasn't an issue.

CPR: So a permanent office is not needed as long as you have a budget for travel and an office in Ottawa for coordination?

Unger: Yes. And I also live about two and a half blocks from the Alberta legislature. I have an office at home in Edmonton from which I make and receive telephone calls which works well.

CPR: As an "elected" Senator, do you feel as though you have a particular mandate that requires you to meet and keep in touch with constituents that unelected Senators do not, or are your appointed colleagues also keeping similar schedules in terms of going to events and meeting with people they represent in their regions?

Unger: Well, I honestly don't want to comment for the unelected Alberta Senators. But for example, last September, the University of Alberta was having a degree presentation to graduates of the Department of Engineering and Senator Claudette Tardif and I were invited to be presenters at the ceremony. That was the only request where I was asked to attend an event with another Senator. I do travel around the province to attend events and to meet with as many people as possible. I tend to focus more on Red Deer and northern Alberta as my territory because the other two ("elected") Senators are from Calgary and southern Alberta.

CPR: Your colleagues in the House of Commons do have constituency offices. In your conversations with them has there ever been discussion about this aspect of their work? Is there a sense there needs to be a broader examination of these access points to government or have they developed in a way that works well enough as is?

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Unger: Your question reminded me of another option. I know my own MP very well, and that pre-dates me being named to the Senate. Arranging a meeting in his office would probably be another option. In addition, during the summer, we (the Conservative Party of Canada) have an Alberta caucus and Edmonton caucus. In these caucuses, we discuss local issues and people will be invited or will ask to come in to give presentations which are always excellent: two examples are the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce or Edmonton Economic Development. And this is another way to communicate with Albertans. If people ask to meet with me, occasionally, conversations are held at the conclusion of a previous meeting or another time is scheduled at their convenience.

CPR: Is there anything about this topic that we haven't covered that you'd like to add?

Unger: I was elected in 2004 when Alberta had three vacancies at the time. Prime Minister Paul Martin did not acknowledge Alberta's elections and he did his own thing. Previously, as a Registered Nurse, I had founded and managed a medical services business for 25 years - with offices in Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary. Had I been appointed to the Senate then, having offices in Alberta would not have been of concern because I would have used those existing offices. However, I still don't see a need for a permanent constituency office and to this point I haven't experienced a time where that's been an issue.