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# Changing Partisan Representatives While Maintaining Office Staff

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## Interview with Elizabeth Witmer, former MPP

*Upon replacing long-time Liberal Herb Epp as MPP for the riding of Waterloo North in 1990, Progressive Conservative Elizabeth Witmer hired two of her predecessor's constituency office staff. In this interview, Witmer notes that although such arrangements are uncommon between politicians with different partisan affiliations, adopting a firmly non-partisan approach to hiring staff for constituency work served her and her community well.*



**CPR:** Can you tell us how you became involved in politics and the path that took you to your election as an MPP?

**Elizabeth Witmer:** I had developed an interest in politics while I was in high school. When I was 18 I had gone to a rally with my Member of

Provincial Parliament in Huron County, and member of cabinet, Charles McNaughton. He invited me to attend a rally with him and his wife. I remember coming home and thinking that I would like to be an MPP just like him. Mr. McNaughton was a very caring person who, regardless of your station in life or your political affiliation, respected and treated everyone the same. I was very impressed with the way he served and worked for his constituents. After graduation from high school I went to Western to become a secondary school teacher. After 12 years teaching I made a decision to leave the teaching profession and seek public office. I decided to run for election as a school board trustee, as opposed to municipal council, because I felt I had the educational experience that would serve me

well. I ran for the board in 1980 and was successful. I became Chair of the Board in 1985. I was invited to run for the PC Party in 1987 and despite the fact that I knew that I could not defeat Herb Epp, because he was a well-respected, people-oriented representative, I decided to become the PC candidate. Sometimes you have to run and lose in order to learn how you can win the next time around. I ran again in 1990 and was successful at a time when the province voted NDP. My riding switched from Liberal to Conservative. It was very much, I believe, based on people voting for a person with a track record as opposed to my political affiliation.

**CPR:** When new parliamentarians are elected they are allowed to use some of the office budget to set up a constituency office. Sometimes when they are replacing someone from the same party they'll hire members of their former staff. But it's extremely rare for a new member to hire the staff of the former member if they represented a different party. Why did you opt to do this?

**Witmer:** I found out that it was extremely rare only after I had done it. I made the decision that my job was to represent the people of my riding and that I needed to represent all of the people in my riding regardless of whether they had supported me or my party. I came to the conclusion that the people who had worked for Herb Epp knew the riding and had served the people extremely well, so I offered two of his constituency staff positions. One of them worked for me until she retired and the other worked for me for the 22 years I was an MPP. Their focus was on putting people first – ours was not a political office. We focused on serving the people well and I don't ever regret that decision

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*Elizabeth Witmer was elected as MPP for Waterloo North in 1990 as a Progressive Conservative and subsequently re-elected in that riding and its successor Kitchener-Waterloo until her retirement in 2012. She began a five-year term as Chair of the Workplace Safety Insurance Board in 2012.*

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because I do believe constituency offices should be focused on helping all of the people all of the time and everyone should feel very welcome approaching you or your staff with problems or concerns. I believe the staff I hired did that job. Their first loyalty was to the people in the riding and I fully believe that's how it should be. I will also say that I did receive a phone call from someone in the party who said, "You know, that's not normally how things are done." So I did discover that's not what usually happens, but to this day I think it was very appropriate that I hired individuals who put people ahead of politics.

**CPR:** You mentioned receiving one call highlighting that this was unusual. Did you have many other colleagues inquiring about how it was working?

**Witmer:** I only remember one call and aside from that one; I don't think people made it a big issue. But after the fact I did become aware that it was more usual to choose someone who had a similar political affiliation to yourself. I had no idea of the political affiliation of the two staff I hired and personally that was irrelevant. I just wanted to make sure they were going to serve all of the people in the riding to the best of their ability as well making sure we addressed the concerns of our constituents to the best of our ability.

**CPR:** What were some of the benefits of keeping the former member's staff?

**Witmer:** They knew the constituents. They were familiar with the job of working in a constituency office. They were aware of the issues and concerns of constituents which included Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and welfare cases, family support issues, birth certificate renewals and replacements, health cards, transportation issues and small business issues. The advantage was the former member's staff knew their job well, and they knew what was expected of them. I appreciated that one of Herb's staff stayed with me throughout my 22 years in the office. This was important when I became a Cabinet Minister in 1995, because I wasn't able to be in my riding as often, she basically managed the office

and stakeholder relationships. However, I was still involved in major decision-making and I never allowed any correspondence to be released without my signature. She did an outstanding job in serving my constituents and at the same time keeping me informed about current issues so that I always had first-hand knowledge about them. This was important information which helped to inform decision-making at caucus and cabinet meetings.

**CPR:** When you took over from Mr. Epp and hired some of his staff, did it allow for you to carry over some of his case files for your own use or is that something that's not done?

**Witmer:** Those files are normally destroyed. However, in this instance we did have access to

some of his files. There was some benefit to having them because it meant the constituent wouldn't have to start all over again with a new constituency assistant who didn't know the background of their case.

**CPR:** Considering that constituency offices have become a key entry point in dealing with governments for various services or in terms of being directed to the right department, should there be a role for

a public servant in constituency offices – someone who would be tied to the institution regardless of which party or member was in office?

**Witmer:** I think it would be too difficult to achieve. Right now it's the MPP who is the employer and there needs to be a level of trust and collaboration between the MPP and the staff who work in the constituency office. You have to have a level of confidence that your staff will represent you in a manner you want to be represented. That is critically important. They are your eyes and ears in the community. They're on the front line. As an MPP you spend a great deal of time in Toronto, especially when you become a cabinet minister. It is the constituency staff who let you know what's going on in the riding, so there has to be a level of trust and honesty between the MPP and their staff. If there are problems they need to let you know as quickly as possible so you can become involved in helping to resolve them.