

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND FRUSTRATIONS OF BACKBENCHERS

Robert Stanfield

In every legislature the number of backbenchers far exceeds the number of cabinet ministers, parliamentary secretaries, committee chairmen and other members with legislative or governmental functions. In this article, a distinguished former parliamentarian suggests ways our parliamentary system could make better use of the talents found among private members. He also offers some practical advice to help members make the best of their time on the backbenches.

My qualifications for writing about backbenchers are perhaps suspect, since I entered both the Nova Scotia legislature in 1948 and the House of Commons in 1967 as leader of my party. But while I never had the honour to serve on the backbenches, I can claim to be a bit more than an observer of their problems since one of the leader's most difficult tasks is to keep members of his caucus reasonably happy.

During my thirty years in politics I was on the receiving end of many complaints from unhappy backbenchers but perhaps never as many as during the early sixties when we held all but four seats in the Nova Scotia legislature. In such circumstances it is very difficult to convince backbenchers on the government side that they are of the slightest importance to the government or to the legislature. It was practically a fulltime job!

SOME CAUSES OF FRUSTRATION

Many legislators feel frustrated because their profession is often held in low repute by members of the public. Studies show that politicians are frequently regarded as spineless, or self-serving, or stupid, or verbose. This is not a new attitude on the part of the public and I do not think we should let this bother us, because, while it is nice to be a member of an admired profession, I think there is some parallel between ourselves and lawyers.

In the province where I grew up, the legal profession was not held in very high repute. However, during the

short time I practiced law I was surprised to find how much confidence in, and respect for, their own lawyer a client tended to have. So I think what we should be concerned about is how we are regarded by our own constituents. That is the important relationship. Members of Parliament or members of the legislature should never allow themselves to be depressed because some people may have rather a poor opinion of their profession.

The media can also be a source of frustration and certain individual journalists can be exasperating. But it is much better for one's blood pressure, and one's political career, not to become paranoid about the press, or to become obsessed by difficulties in getting things across. We should never adopt the belief that the press generally is against us or our party. That is a very debilitating attitude. If you do not like or do not trust journalists it shows, and this does not help in your relationship with them. The media, after all, are only one factor in your relationship with constituents and colleagues. Actually I found that from time to time, some journalists can be lovable if you take the trouble to get to know them and do not become too upset by some of the critical things they say about you.

When we think of the context in which legislators operate I think the relationship with your own family is a very big factor and can be a definite source of tension. Long sessions put a particular strain on legislators and can very well affect his or her effectiveness. There is probably no simple answer to this. I have known longtime parliamentarians who have expressed very

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deep regret that their children have grown up without getting to know them. At the very least, legislatures should make generous travel provisions for their members and spouses. I think they should also give some help towards a second home. It does not have to be a castle but it might provide some tangible assistance in helping a member of the legislature keep in touch, not only with his spouse but with his children. That is not an easy thing to do even with help, but I think it is a very important aspect for the peace of mind of a member.

I was amazed when I first started to visit politicians in Ontario, to find that provincial ministers who took their families to Toronto would be in serious difficulty. They were expected to live in some kind of a nest in Toronto through the week and then go home and spend the weekend with their family. I found this quite extraordinary and very parochial.



The same problem does not apply to backbenchers, but it is something a member has to keep in mind before accepting a cabinet appointment. In the little province of Nova Scotia, it was always understood that when somebody entered the government, he was expected to move to Halifax. It was unusual for him not to, at least in my time, and I suspect that is probably still the case. People took it for granted. He or she still has to keep in touch with the constituency, but it is expected he will take his family to where he is working. I was amazed to find many Ontario ministers living all over the province and trying to run an office in Toronto. I thought the

people of Ontario were being unnecessarily hard and lacking in understanding of the needs of a minister; and I hope that has changed somewhat today.

Now, every member wants to feel useful, but to be useful he must also feel competent. One of the things we learn when we enter a legislature is that success outside by no means guarantees success in the legislature. It is a different world. It calls for rather different talents. I must stress the importance of understanding procedure. There are some people who sit in legislatures for years but really do not understand what is going on, or when they can intervene. It is a continuing source of puzzlement to them. You cannot really function effectively as a member of the legislature unless you understand how things are done and how you can do things. We do not all need to be experts, but many members believe they cannot master the rules because they are not trained lawyers. Some of the most distinguished experts are not lawyers.

When one arrives in Ottawa, the Clerk of the House of Commons or somewhere else may give a lecture on the subject, but that it is not enough. Legislatures should take the problem seriously and make available, if not continuous, at least frequently, periodic, substantial instruction in procedure. It is not enough to simply arrange a lecture or two in procedure and assume members are going to pick up the rest.

A SCHOOL FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

Parliamentarians may also be frustrated by the wide range of subjects that come before the House. This may be an area where the lawyers have an advantage. We are used to dealing with things we do not know anything about! But it is difficult for a fellow with a farming, fishing or business background to discuss something that has not been part of his life. You cannot make everybody an expert in everything, but surely we can devise ways for giving a legislator a better understanding of things he has not run into previously. There is staff, there are briefings and there are caucus committees, but I think legislatures should consider doing something that has been done in business. They have established schools where businessmen can go to take courses. We rely too much on on-the-job training. I think some institute should be established, perhaps in association with a university, where a legislator can get some training on the kind of analysis, techniques and approaches he needs to use in dealing with things outside his ordinary career. Members would be much more

valuable to themselves, to their constituents, to their legislatures and to their party if they understood how to learn something about topics, in which they are not conversant. People say they are too busy, particularly for formal institutional training. But everybody is busy. I think members should receive financial help to get this kind of training. It is in the interest of the provinces and the country to do this kind of thing.

In the case of Canada, I would also like to emphasize the importance of learning the second official language. I have never accepted the argument that people do not have time to learn a second language after they have been elected. If they have the motivation they can find the time. I found time when I was Leader of the Opposition because in the federal Parliament, unilingual members have a tremendous handicap not only on the floor of the House but in other activities.

At the provincial level, legislators are able to perform much better on behalf of their province when attending national conferences if they can speak and understand the other language. An English speaking Canadian who goes to a conference and hears somebody speak entirely in French does not get the same impression as if that person had spoken, to some extent, in English. The reverse is surely exactly the same. I have been discussing the question of competence. But what about the scope of using this competence once it is acquired, and the feeling of usefulness that goes with it and which heightens the performance of the legislator.

THE MEMBER, HIS PARTY AND HIS CONSTITUENTS

One thing that bothers many members is that they are expected to vote the party line. They come to feel they are simply numbers. I would like to see more consideration given to some method of arranging more free votes. I recognize that in any session certain bills are the core of the government's legislative program and that government has to get those measures through. In these cases, party discipline is important. But on the other hand, there are a lot of government bills that are not really part of the core program. In those cases it really would not affect the government if some of its members voted against those bills, provided it is understood they are not votes of confidence.

I do not say there would be no difficulties, but if we could reach the point where we only had a party vote

when the government indicated it was a matter of confidence, this would increase the dignity of the backbenchers. There could be free votes in the opposition too. A member would then feel less like a number. It would not only be good for both government and opposition backbenchers but it would be good too for the perception of members of Parliament by the public. It would make them look bigger, more independent, more important, more self-reliant. It should be given serious consideration.

Then there are other things affecting the feeling of usefulness of a member of parliament in his capacity as a candidate. Take the question of constituency finance. If a candidate has to rely entirely on party financing he develops a sense of dependence; he is dependent on what party headquarters will provide him to keep his association going. The kind of election he can run depends upon what funds come down the line. Measures to facilitate independent financing on a constituency basis is very important to the sense of independence and dignity of a member of a legislature. Therefore, I very much favour what has been done in Ottawa and in Ontario and perhaps in some other areas now, — the provision of tax credits or tax deductions which facilitate the financial operations of constituency; tax credits for political contributions.

While speaking of campaigns, it is unfortunate that they have become so leader and media oriented. This must have a demoralizing effect on other members who are running. If the leader does not get into his constituency a candidate is apt to feel left out. Nevertheless a candidate should not underrate his or her capacity to run a good local campaign with hard work. I just mention this to emphasize the importance of a candidate's not accepting the idea that he either gets in because the media campaign at the national or provincial level works, or it does not. I think there is a lot a candidate can do to establish his own campaign, particularly if he has a reasonable amount of funds to use.

Perhaps I could just conclude with a few words about attitudes of members towards their profession. For one thing I have always believed that Edmund Burke was right when he said, in the eighteenth century, that a member of parliament is a representative of his constituents but that he should exercise his own judgment as to what is in the public interest even though he may differ to some extent on a particular question. On the other hand, it is quite possible for a member of Parliament to get so far out of step from public opinion that a sense of alienation develops between constituents

and members, and between the people of a province or the people of the country, and their legislature or parliament. For example, during the last decade here in Ottawa, the official languages bill was not universally understood or supported across the country. Many members of parliament supported that bill at the time, knowing that if a poll were taken, the majority of their constituents were against it, at least until it was further explained to them.

There were two debates with respect to capital punishment, and again many members of parliament voted to abolish capital punishment because they believed it should be abolished, although they knew very well that perhaps 80 per cent of their constituents favoured some kind of capital punishment. Perhaps these two things coming, not exactly together, but in the same five or six years, created a sense of alienation between Canadians and their Parliament. I would not want to exaggerate it but there is that problem and it is always a question of judgment. I think a government and a parliament have to give leadership. They have to be ahead of public opinion in some respect, but if they get too far out of step with public opinion, not only can the government get in trouble politically, but a sense of institutional alienation can develop.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDE

Finally, frustration can be reduced considerably by developing a proper attitude in the face of adversity. It is

important not to take oneself too seriously. Upon entering politics one must realize there is nothing as ruthless as the addition of votes on election night. People do not mean to be unkind, but the end result is going to be pretty rough on all but one. Most people who enter politics will run into a rock sooner or later and relatively few get through without getting bruised. How badly they are bruised depends on their attitudes. Defeat should never be taken personally. You have to recognize that you personally are not so important. It is the people who decide things. You may think they are unwise in their decisions. But looking at things in perspective, there are other things in life besides winning elections.

Thus while there are many frustrations and disappointments in political life, when I look back over my 30 years as a parliamentarian I cannot think of any way in which I would sooner have used the time. I cannot think of any life which is a greater challenge to use whatever brains the good Lord gave you, any greater challenge on your physical resources and stamina, and any greater challenge to your emotional stability to deal with the pricks and arrows that strike you from time to time. It is a challenging career which really calls upon all the resources you may have. I have no regrets about the time I spent as a politician, but I would like to see some things done to make life a little easier, for future members and particularly those who serve in the backbenches.