

Seminar: Members and Their Constituency

Every Member of Parliament represents a constituency. Yet the amount of attention paid to the Member-constituency relationship by scholars is quite small compared to its importance in our democratic system. Members must spend time building connections to their constituencies, understanding concerns, and mediating these tensions within a party caucus if party policy conflicts with what an MP is hearing locally. Additional responsibilities such as being in cabinet or having a constituency far from Ottawa where travel is difficult can create other challenges. The Canadian Study of Parliament Group organized a seminar on March 16, 2018 which brought parliamentarians, academics, parliamentary staff and journalists together to explore ideas of constituency representation and engagement. This article summarizes the seminar's sessions and provides some insight into how these various groups of stakeholders think about the nature of constituencies.

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Connecting with Constituents: Observations on how MPs engage at home

Library of Parliament analyst Madalina Chesoi presented research she conducted while serving as a parliamentary intern at the same time as the most recent parliament was sworn in. Most MPs in the 42nd parliament were rookies, and this meant that dozens of newly elected politicians suddenly became responsible for opening up and managing something similar to a small business. Most constituency offices have two to four staff members responsible for case work and referral services. Each office serves about 100,000 citizen-clients, though some remote or rural-urban ridings may have more than one constituency office serving a smaller, but more dispersed population.

Chesoi conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with MPs and two more with House of Commons staff. She learned that the main concerns of MPs were: 1) logistical needs (physical working space, lease agreements and technology) and, 2) constituency casework. Some MPs expressed frustration in the lag time required to set up telephone and internet lines.

These delays are understandable given the scope of the offices, but she says some new MPs would have liked more guidance in the meantime. Chesoi noted that the orientation sessions for new MPs did not address constituency concerns much. She concluded by stating that all of her interviewees wanted greater structure for these support systems for new MPs, but they differed for how this should be accomplished. Some raised the possibility of webinars or a standard welcome package with checklist.

Initially scheduled for the seminar's second session, organizers asked Ottawa-Vanier MP Mona Fortier to speak earlier so that she could attend a meeting in her constituency later that morning. Fortier said her entrepreneurial background helped with the work of setting up a constituency office. Elected on April 3, 2017, she decided to locate her office beside the MPP's office, noting that she works closely with her provincial counterpart and local councillors. The long-time former MP's office was in a less visible location and she decided she wanted and needed more signage. Among her immediate concerns were building a team and determining how much she could do with the funding provided. Fortier hired three people for her office and asked her executive assistant to work from this office. She also has a part-time employee who serves as a liaison with the large Muslim community in her riding. This hire has helped with outreach and building connections greatly.

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About 80 percent of the cases opened by her office deal with immigration matters. The rest are a combination of pension issues, requests to help a constituent look for work, or other matters. With so many federal employees living in her constituency, Fortier told the audience that they would be surprised to learn that only five of her current cases deal with the Phoenix system payroll problems. She said people are scared to come forward to seek help and that more outreach was necessary.

Fortier explained that MPs are entrepreneurs in a sense, but they also have a social role. For example, a constituent who was being abused by her husband came for help to get out of that situation. "I'm also the bearer of bad news," she said. Every week she must meet with people to break the news that a relative can't come to Canada despite doing everything she could to further the case with Immigration officials. "This is still the best job in the world, but it does come with some hard realities," she added.

Louise Cockram, a PhD candidate in Political Science at Carleton University reported on her research. She conducted interviews with 35 former Nova Scotia MLAs who served from 1993 to 2013. She sought out to see if Samara's similar project with federal MPs produced findings that were applicable to the provincial scene. Among her interviewees, MLAs prioritised constituency work and said they felt that was the most important aspect of their job. Some former church clergy MLAs compared it to church service work, while other likened it to other professions such as social work or legal aid work. Cockram described the intake process and case management as being similar to a law firm's process.

In terms of calls and cases, road work/paving was very important for some rural MLAs, while others dealt with electric bills and being disconnected. She told the story of an MLA visited by a single mother who said she didn't have food to feed her family for the weekend. He rushed home, got some deer meat his son had prepared, and headed back to the office to give it to her. She said this example demonstrates the level of individual service these MLAs offer. Of course, other calls dealing with a blocked toilet, or resume-writing help, may be handled differently. Cockram reported that urban MLAs received different, but similar calls, including calls for medical assistance. Junior cabinet ministers and backbenchers said they didn't feel they had much of a role or power in the House; but doing constituency work gave them a sense of doing meaningful work.

Royce Koop, and associate professor of Political Science at the University of Manitoba, discussed his new book, *Representation in Action*. Koop and his co-authors were interested in 'practice of representation,' and concerned by literature that overemphasizes discipline in parliament, overlooks agency and adaptability often found in constituencies. One of the central questions they hoped to answer was why MPs develop different styles when representing their constituents?

Koop explained that representation is "an ongoing process of constructing and maintaining connection between MPs and constituents." An MP's representational style (overall patterns in connection-building activities) is based on policy connections, service connections, symbolic connections, and party connections. Three factors tend to influence why certain styles develop: personal goals, riding context, experiential learning. While doing research for the book he observed 11 MPs by spending between four to seven days with each in their constituencies and Ottawa and conducted semi-structured interviews.

Koop used the balance of his presentation to do a case study involving Churchill—Keewatinook Aski MP Nikki Ashton. First elected in 2008, the Manitoba NDP MP has developed a service-oriented representational style. She is concerned with construction and maintenance of service connections and demonstrating service through presence. Koop said in the authors observations of her at work in the constituency there was an emphasis on being present and being seen. Visibility was important because it's a vast rural constituency and less easy to get media attention for issues. Moreover, inaccessibility necessitates presence. Among her personal goals, Ashton is focussed on human rights at home and particularly concerns shaped by nature of her riding which is Northern, rural/dispersed, and containing a sizable Indigenous population. Koop related that he and his co-authors often heard Ashton saying: "There's no election, I'm just visiting." This phrase underscores a sense of being marginalized and ignored by politicians except around election time.

He concluded by highlighting two broad themes in representation in Canada: 1) Diversity: in practice of representation, also in how Canadians experience representation; and 2) Agency and adaptability: MPs make choices about types of representatives they'll be and their representational styles are dynamic.



Moderator Anna Esselment introduces the first panel. (Left to right): Kelly Blidook, Madalina Chesoi, Louise Cockram, Royce Koop, Anthony M. Sayers, and Mona Fortier.

A final presenter, Anthony M. Sayers, an associate professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary, titled his talk “From Chaos to Cohesion: The Engine Room of Canadian Democracy.” Sayers explained that Canada has one of the highest turnover rates in democratic world, where one in two MPs can expect to lose their seats at an election. In the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia about one in four or five representatives will lose their office at any general election. At the electoral level there is flexibility (high rates of turnover), but at the cabinet level there is high level of rigidity (low turnover in governing party).

The Canadian system, with its first-past-the-post electoral system that prioritizes geography, also has few organizational roles for MPs in Canada. This practice is unusual compared to other democracies. With, arguably, the most open process for the candidate nominations in the democratic world, Canadian parties are also highly permeable (members and candidates enter and exit easily).

Sayers noted that Canadian parties have an unusually high reliance on raising funds from voters and local campaigns remain key collection points for this activity. When local things matter, and if the party doesn’t control things as much there, that’s where MPs devote their energy, he said. Sayers explained that it’s a fairly remarkable dynamic where MPs often vow to do the right thing and go back to help the community even knowing they may still lose the next election. While some of this representation and service work is in self-interest, there is also sense of being a good democrat in the system. Many MPs conclude that there’s little value in other work, so it’s best to simply help constituents.

On the Ground: The Practice of MPs in their Constituencies

Following a short break, three former MPs offered their reflections on how they served their respective constituencies. Françoise Boivin, first elected as a Liberal MP for Gatineau in 2004 and then re-elected



(Left to right): Peter Millikin, Christian Paradis, and Françoise Boivin.

to the riding as an NDP MP in 2011, told the audience that she initially had little idea of how to set up a constituency office or what services she should offer. Many of her requests dealt with immigration issues. While there is an impression that an MP does all the work for these people, they simply help to direct them to the right department. Sometimes they can help speed up the process with help of people in the departments.

Boivin said most of her hires were very green and inexperienced, but she relied on the personal quality of the staff to help with these files. During her first term in office the unstable minority government made it difficult to spend as much time in the constituency as she would have liked. When she was defeated in 2006 she vowed to concentrate on being present in her riding if she were ever re-elected.

Some things had changed when she returned in 2011, however. Social media and Facebook helped her to foster close ties with many constituents without necessarily seeing them in person. She would use

Facebook to explain what she would be talking about in the House of Commons and asked for feedback about issues her constituents thought she should be addressing. Boivin suggested that every party can and should do more to help newly elected MPs navigate their responsibilities in their constituencies.

Peter Milliken, a former Liberal MP from Kingston, noted that since his constituency was close to Ottawa he was able to return home almost every weekend. Slots for appointments during these weekends filled up quickly. While in opposition, many of these meetings dealt with helping people with passport applications, since Kingston did not have a passport office at the time; once in government more people would come in to discuss issues or problems they were having.

Milliken explained the importance of being attentive to his constituents and visible in the constituency was made clear to him the year before he won office. Flora MacDonald, a popular MP and cabinet minister, was no longer living in Kingston and constituents were

expressing dissatisfaction with lack of time she spent in the constituency office. He recalled attending a concert where MacDonald was also present. When she departed at intermission, he could hear and see people in the crowd being miffed that she had left halfway through the event. He said he avoided doing this like the plague.

Milliken raised the importance of co-operating with MPPs and municipal politicians. Even though the issues people coming to meet him about weren't always in his jurisdiction, he could still offer to help them find the right person and leave a positive impression. Once he became Speaker, things changed dramatically with constituency work. Getting word about issues of concern to cabinet ministers was easier, but he was criticized at campaign time or being ineffective. Milliken said he believed he actually had more sway as Speaker than as a backbench MP who could spend more time in the constituency because the ministers wouldn't like to say no to a request from the Speaker, at least not immediately.

He concluded with a note of concern – there have been fewer questions in the House about constituency matters recently. MPs are often told what their topic for Question Period is and sometimes even the exact text to use. Previously, constituency questions often received coverage in the local paper.

Former Conservative MP Christian Paradis represented Mégantic—L'Érable from 2006-2015. The main issues in his riding were the asbestos mines, forestry, supply management (circovirus disease affected hog producers), internet access (remote areas) and old manufacturing.

Paradis noted how frustrating it was not to have any system to transfer files from a previous representative to a newly elected one. Although confidentiality was cited as a reason for not passing along files, he didn't understand the lack of continuity. Through carefully managing his budget, Paradis was able to have three constituency offices (including satellite offices) to better serve older constituents who would not have

been able to travel to the riding's main population centre.

When he was appointed Quebec lieutenant for his party, Paradis said he became stressed that he was away from the riding much more often. To prevent constituents from thinking he would become an absentee MP in the role, he used social media to post photos of every time he was in his riding. Although he was only there about 40 per cent of the time, Paradis said he was 'seen' to be much more active.

Paradis concluded by discussing the Lac Mégantic fire. Although he was asked to be his government's spokesperson, the moment he learned of the disaster he said he only had his constituency hat on. He could not represent the government when all his focus was simply being there for his people.

During a Q&A period, an audience member asked if taking Fridays off for constituency business and family time would assist in helping MPs with their work-life balance. Milliken said he supports such an idea but would also favour a return to night sittings. Since Members now get served lunch in their respective lobbies, there is little social interaction anymore. Night sittings and return to sitting together at the parliamentary restaurant for dinner would do wonders for inter-party co-operation. Boivin said the difficulty is if Friday sittings are cut, someone will fill it with something else.

Another questioner asked about how MPs establish boundaries for the type of help they provide. Do they ever say: "I could probably help this constituent, but should I?" Milliken told attendees that an MP always has to try to help, but it does not have to be done publicly. Paradis offered that "the golden rule is you listen to everybody, but sometimes you can't help." Boivin explained that the rule for her in the riding is uniformity of service. "Sometimes a person can be more convincing than another, but our job is not to be their immigration lawyer," she said. "We direct them to resources they need."