

# *Tricorne Tweeting: Alberta's Speaker Engages the Public and Enhances Democracy*

Interpreting and enforcing the rules of parliament is a central part of a Speaker's responsibilities within an Assembly. However, it is certainly not the only part of the job. A Speaker is also an ambassador of the Assembly, and it is her or his responsibility to explain, educate and provide resources on parliamentary democracy. A Speaker is, therefore, an advocate and exponent of democracy and democratic institutions. In an effort to fulfill this role and communicate in a way that draws in a large audience, Alberta's Speaker has created a new digital and social media campaign to engage with Albertans and visitors interested in the province's parliamentary processes and traditions. In this article, the author outlines aspects of the campaign and explains why a Speaker's neutral, non-partisan position makes him or her uniquely equipped to advocate and explain parliamentary democracy to citizens and visitors alike.

**Philip Massolin**

Parliamentary education and outreach can take many forms. The Legislative Assembly of Alberta offers heritage interpretation, Legislature tours, school programs, and a Visitor Centre with exhibit space that explores the parliamentary history of the province. However, the recently elected Speaker of the Assembly, the Honourable Nathan Cooper, has embarked on a project to use digital and social media to better engage Albertans in a conversation about the history and conventions of the Assembly.

Those interested in Alberta's democratic traditions can get a behind-the-scenes glimpse into both the legislative process and the Legislature building itself, through Speaker Cooper's ongoing video series which covers a number of topics and is available on a variety of social media platforms. Speaker Cooper's videos show how the use of technology, combined with personal storytelling can inform, educate and even entertain Albertans and other visitors about the institution of parliament in the province. A main goal of the video series is to demystify the Legislative Assembly and to use a modern means of communication to make this content accessible to a wide and diverse audience.

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**Speaker Cooper visits the Palm Room.**



### Speaker Cooper wishes Albertans a Happy Canada Day.

"If you're here, it's likely because you have questions," declares the opening line in the Message from the Speaker on the Legislative Assembly of Alberta's website. "Whether you're a student seeking to learn more about our parliamentary democracy, a citizen seeking information about legislation currently before the Assembly or a first-time visitor to the Legislature Grounds, we are here to help." Above this text, where a series of short videos are available to watch, Speaker Cooper makes his own contribution to answering Albertans' questions, piquing their interest in parliamentary procedures and practices and offering a few "fun facts" about Alberta's parliamentary past. Click on the video and Speaker Cooper first appears in the Legislature Library, clutching an object that turns out to be a hamburger, encased and preserved in resin. It is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hamburger, he explains, which was tabled in 1969 by an MLA who cheekily critiqued the food being offered at the time by the Legislature cafeteria. In one video Speaker Cooper is in the Chamber, discussing the total number of Members of the Legislative Assembly that have served the

province throughout its history; in another, he is on the Speaker's balcony overlooking the Legislature grounds, inviting people to visit the Legislature to celebrate Canada Day.

All of Speaker Cooper's videos are available through his various social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Some highlights in the digital series include:

- a video shot in the "Palm Room", high atop the Legislature rotunda, showing the public a rare glimpse of a room that visitors who tour the Legislature no longer get to see;
- an explanation of why MLAs "speak through the Chair", instead of addressing each other by proper names as they debate and ask questions in the Assembly;
- information about the size of constituencies, in terms of population and geography;
- a short primer on how the Assembly funds the Government through interim and supplementary supply.



**Speaker Cooper discusses why MLAs speak through the Speaker instead of speaking directly to each other.**

So what observations can one make about this initiative? Twitter indicates that each of the videos has thousands of views, with the most popular having approximately 11,000 views. They have also garnered interest from the mainstream media. In an article entitled, "New Alberta Speaker sheds light on rarely-seen corners of legislature," Global News Edmonton's Jennifer Crosby points out that Speaker Cooper's video series "takes the public inside politics in a whole new way" and says that his work is an attempt "to remove some of the confusion around the political process". She concludes that the Speaker's "enthusiasm for the role and all its trappings" is evident in the videos.<sup>1</sup>

Speaker Cooper has been successful in increasing access to information about parliamentary democracy by reaching out to Albertans beyond the elected members and staff who work within the Legislature. Online communications tools – including social media – can break down barriers of geography and demographics, reaching citizens from all corners of the province, and beyond. Users can access as much or as little of the content as they want, on their own

devices, and on their own time; they do not have to visit the Legislature or consult complex texts about procedure to do so.

Although vitally important, the transmission of this type of information via social media is only one aspect of accessibility. Accessibility is also very much about the message itself and the way content is expressed and delivered. In sharp contrast to the complex and text-intensive descriptions of the parliamentary authorities, such as *Erskine May* or *Beauchesne's*, Speaker Cooper's videos are brief and to the point. He delivers his messages in plain language, avoids technical terms, and explains complex concepts in a straightforward, yet conversational manner. His choice of topic for each video is key, because the material covered is not restricted to parliamentary procedure. Glimpses into some of the quirkier and interesting vignettes of parliamentary life at the Legislature are interspersed among these more sober presentations. Whatever the topic being discussed, Speaker Cooper is always passionate – engaging his audience as well as informing it.

So how do these videos relate to the parliamentary role of the Speaker? The Speaker's role is much more than the interpretation and enforcement of the rules of parliament. A Speaker is also an ambassador of the Assembly, and it is her or his responsibility to explain, educate and provide resources on parliamentary democracy. As such, the Speaker plays another critical role within not only the Assembly but also within the province itself: the role of advocate and exponent of democracy and democratic institutions. Effectively performing this role well requires a purposeful and earnest effort to inform and educate the public as to what democracy is, how it functions, why it matters, and how it impacts the people of the province.

By way of analogy to what is happening in Alberta, John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons at Westminster, is also an active proponent of educating citizens about parliamentary democracy. In addition to being responsible for the oversight of educational programs and facilities, including a state-of-the-art education centre on parliamentary democracy, Speaker Bercow provides the public the opportunity to speak directly with him, over Skype, in an "Ask the Speaker" segment. Here, he fields questions posed by students aged 7 to 18 about the role of the Speaker, how parliament works, and how the House of Commons operates. "What is the meaning of impartiality and how does it apply to the Speaker?" and "Why do you say 'Order!, Order!'" are some of the more popular questions asked of Speaker Bercow.

It is also notable that the Speaker is uniquely situated to talk about the traditions and history of an Assembly or Parliament. Unlike members of the Government and other elected Members who often operate within partisan parameters, neutrality and

nonpartisanship are intrinsic to the Speaker's role. In Alberta, the Speaker is guided by the principle of impartiality in his approach to outreach and is well-placed to speak with authority – and without bias – about all things parliamentary.

To conclude, for many, many decades, understanding parliamentary democracy – and the rules and procedures it is based upon – was typically reserved for those with direct access to the process (such as MLAs or parliamentary officials) or those who had studied complex parliamentary authorities or accounts. In other words, knowledge about the democratic process was accessible primarily to society's educated elite. With advances in communications technology allowing for increased access to social media, a greater number of people from different backgrounds and from areas far removed from legislatures can now connect with these processes.

Utilizing new technologies to shed light on decades-old traditions is not only an educational opportunity, it is also an opportunity to honour the democratic principles the Legislative Assembly of Alberta promises to uphold: equality, transparency, accessibility, and civic engagement. Speaker Cooper embraces these principles as he uses new communications tools and platforms to lift the curtain on what can sometimes be a mysterious process and introduces everyday citizens to the foundations of their democratic system in a fun and accessible way.

## Notes

- 1 Jennifer Crosby, "New Alberta Speaker sheds light on rarely-seen corners of legislature." *Global News*, June 26, 2019. URL: <https://globalnews.ca/news/5433747/alberta-speaker-social-media-legislature-politics-cooper/>