

The Positive Role of A Government Backbencher

George Moody, MLA

The role that government plays in the day-to-day lives of people has changed dramatically in the last forty years. This has brought about great changes in the expectations the electorate has of government. Today, there are few areas into which the long hand of government does not extend. Forty years ago, the entire Nova Scotia provincial budget was less than seven million dollars; today the estimates for most single departments are more than that. With this expansion of the government's role in the ordinary citizen's life has come a change in the role of politicians.

Sometimes one wonders whether the individual backbencher has any real role to play within the present system. I suppose if one were sitting in opposition, the advantages of being on the government backbench would seem quite evident. In the same way, the government backbencher may look with envy toward cabinet ministers and all those politicians who make up what the media are so fond of calling the "inner circle".

For those who are not on the inside, it is difficult to see and understand the great gulf between appearance and reality in government. To the outsider it appears that, if you sit in government, then you have a hand in every decision that the government makes. Such is not the case. One of the most difficult tasks of the individual member is coming to terms with this great divergence between the ideal and the fact. The day a member first sits on the government backbench, a certain awareness must hit him: his essential day-to-day business is not decision-making, but representation.

A member is elected to office because the majority of voters believes that he will best represent their needs in the government decision-making process. Politicians must be constantly cognizant that, in Canada, our governmental system is representational. One of the most positive roles government backbenchers play, on an individual basis, is that of representation.

The backbench MLA on the government side of the House finds himself in a more delicate, but perhaps more potent, representational role than a member of the opposition. The government backbencher, like the opposition member, can function as a critic; but for obvious reasons, he usually carries out his responsibilities in a less public manner. Government backbenchers generally have access on a confidential basis to decision makers within the senior



The distance between the front and back benches may be only a single aisle but in terms of responsibilities the gulf is much wider
(Nova Scotia, Government Services, Information Division)

bureaucracy. They may attempt, in private, to influence the Premier, ministers or public servants on matters of policy and day-to-day administration. Obviously in this situation, the ability of the backbencher to succeed depends to a great extent on how well he is able to articulate his position and how well he is able to use the system to his advantage.

Backbenchers do not have to deal with the nitty gritty aspects of running a specific government department. They are likely to be in their ridings more often than are cabinet ministers. Consequently, though not altogether deliberately, they become the eyes and ears of government. They hear at first hand the electorate expressing its concerns and reacting to government activities. These concerns and reactions they bring to the attention of the premier and ministers, either on a one-to-one basis or in caucus.

Representation, both direct and indirect, is thus one positive role the government backbencher can play in the formulation of policies and programs. For a backbencher to be effective, it is

George Moody has been a member of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly since 1978. This is a revised version of an address delivered to the 8th Canadian Regional Seminar held in Ottawa in November 1982.

incumbent upon him to learn how the system works. There are elected officials, in office for many years, who still do not use the "system" as effectively as they could, because they have never taken the time to understand it.

I have referred to what I feel is the positive role the government backbencher plays on an individual basis. Let us for a moment explore that same role when applied collectively. There is a trend, both in Ottawa and in the provinces, to expand the use of legislative committees in an effort to involve and draw upon the talents of backbenchers. The committee system, when used properly, can be of service both to backbenchers and to the government.

I will concentrate on special and advisory committees rather than on standing committees of the House. There are obvious differences between them; and the opportunities they offer backbenchers differ measurably. Committees offer members the potential for tangible rewards for effort expended. I can illustrate this thesis from two situations in which I felt, as a government backbencher, that I had some positive influence on both government policy and program formulation.

While sitting on an advisory committee reviewing regulations associated with the *Workmen's Compensation Act*, I became aware of and involved in an area that hitherto had been of only peripheral interest to me. To make a very long story short, the committee came back to the government with a list of recommendations for changes in how regulations are made under the Act, and with a small change in focus towards workmen's compensation policies. It is very satisfying to have one's ideas and suggestions translated from paper to legislation, and to have one's views adopted as government policy.

Recently, I had the honour to sit on a special committee studying the role volunteer firemen play in our communities. Even before the final report was submitted, some changes were implemented at the request of the firemen. The changes in themselves were not of major importance. These small victories or accomplishments are, however, the day-to-day business of the elected representative. In actual practice, few major decisions or major changes in government policy and direction are ever made. The little gains are sometimes considered the most important. Effective use of the committee system is one real way the backbencher can make a positive contribution in shaping government policy.

A government is only as strong as its backbench. It is from this backbench that the government must draw its ministers and it is upon this backbench that the government must depend to pass its legislation. One often hears of caucus complaints about ministerial isolation from caucus. There are always problems to contend with, but both the executive and the backbencher should realize that they depend on each other.

Aside from being the constant link between the ballot box and the corridors of power, backbenchers constitute a reservoir of under-used talent. This reservoir is being tapped more and more, with positive results in the formulation of policy and programs. The backbencher will always meet with frustration and disappointment. There are as well, however, legitimate rewards. The equilibrium between the two is fragile: such is the nature of the system. Through representation, through committee work, and caucus, the backbencher has a variety of ways to contribute positively to the formulation of government policy and programs. As the rules of the game change, the future will no doubt offer still more opportunities.