

On the Front Lines: The New MP and Constituency Work

This essay has been drawn from a past issue of *Parliamentary Government*, published by the Parliamentary Centre with the support of the House of Commons. members of Parliament mentioned in this essay are in many instances now former members of Parliament.

What do the following have in common?

- Suburban, with well-educated, mainly retired and upper-income households
- Urban, university neighbourhood with a definite intellectual tone, and a population that is both nationally and internationally aware
- Large and remote, encompassing topography ranging from mountains to ocean, located at a distance of two days' travel from Ottawa
- A small city on the banks of the Ottawa River, within sight of Parliament Hill
- Stretches from tree line to the Arctic, home to 36,000 people, many of them native, many of them immigrants
- A mixture of farms, small towns and the city 800 kilometres long, characterized by high seasonal unemployment in its two major industries: fisheries and forestry

All are capsule descriptions of constituencies by their members of Parliament. These few words on location, population and problems convey the incredible diversity that is represented in the House of Commons. Those who talk about the constituency role of MPs should beware: the roles are as diverse as Canada itself.

The Importance of Constituency Work

All of the Members we interviewed for this issue agreed that constituency work is a major part of their responsibilities: estimates of total office time spent in this way ranged from 50 to about 80 per cent. Even so, few went as far as Gaston Isabelle, MP for Hull since 1965 to 1988. In his view the only role of an MP is to represent the constituency, and this is done by putting down deep personal and professional roots in the

riding – and by listening to the people in the process. The balance of an average backbench MP's work – committees, Question Period, national and international issues – he sees as a fantasy world of talk without influence. And according to Isabelle, many MPs are spending more and more of their time on this “busy” work, “like monkeys looking for trees to climb.”

As young opposition Members, Brian Tobin and Jim Fulton represented large rural ridings with serious economic problems. Much of their time and commitment was to constituency work, but both confessed they would have liked a bit more time for addressing national issues. Brian Tobin's Newfoundland riding of Humber-Port au Port St. Barbe suffered from high seasonal unemployment and so about 60 per cent of his time (down from 75 per cent when he was first elected) was given to constituent casework. He admitted feeling somewhat envious of colleagues who had time to be “thinkers” about policy-oriented issues.

Jim Fulton, who represented the huge, rugged northern B.C. riding of Skeena, estimated that 80 per cent of his time went to constituency work, with the remaining 20 per cent spent on committees and other House business. For him, this meant that “a lot of the things I went into politics to do I didn't have time for.” But again there were compensations. Fulton was able to help people with serious problems and he enjoyed a high profile in his riding. Ninety per cent of the people knew who he was.

Jim Edwards, first elected in 1984 as Member for Edmonton South, said that every aspect of the job had been more demanding than he had expected, but this was especially true of constituency work. At the same time he found it to be the most satisfying part of the job because it drew on the communications and public

relations skills he had developed in broadcasting. Mary Collins, who represented the suburban Vancouver riding of Capilano, likewise found the constituency demands, especially the correspondence, greater than she had expected. As to whether Members are more or less constituency oriented than they used to be, she would only say: “It has always been a strong part of the job.” Mary Collins’s former constituency was well educated, affluent and “remote in every sense of the word” from Ottawa. As a result, much of the correspondence she received was policy related.

Different Constituency Roles

1. Generally speaking, there are four distinct, albeit interrelated, constituency roles. The first, just mentioned, is casework. It typically consists of staff work in obtaining information and lodging demands on behalf of constituents – although it is sometimes more complicated and riskier than that. Jim Edwards described his becoming involved on occasion in family disputes: “I feel like an amateur social worker at times.” The sheer volume of casework can be enormous. Brian Tobin reported that his office had 6,000 active personal constituency files at any one time, excluding those deemed to be closed.
2. The second major area of constituency work is what Geoff Scott, former Member for Hamilton-Wentworth, described as the constituency-based policy role. In essence, this consists of seeking ways to benefit constituencies through existing or proposed federal programs and legislation. Geoff Scott involved himself in projects ranging from airport development to the establishment of historic sites. Dave Nickerson, MP for the Western Arctic, described his special concern for regulations or legislation that impact on the North, such as taxation of northern benefits. Jim Fulton said that much of his time was spent trying to put together deals for his constituency by practising “hydraulic jack politics”: “As soon as you see a hairline crack in a bill or a report, you jump in and try to widen it for the benefit of your constituents.” This work – in his case, on job-creation programs and lumber exports – involved coalition-building in the constituency and persistent lobbying in Ottawa. As well, Fulton acknowledged he competed to some degree with neighbouring constituencies and their MPs, who were after the same benefits.

A question that arises is whether in lobbying for their constituencies, it is an advantage to be a government or an opposition MP. Jim Edwards said the public expects a government Member to accomplish more, but Jim Fulton suggested the reality is otherwise. “In order to get something for constituencies you have to be one of two things: in the cabinet or a tough opposition Member. I fear for constituencies represented by government backbenchers.” Geoff Scott declared himself undecided on the question, but stressed that he tried not to let partisan politics stand in the way of working for his constituents. When the need arose, he worked closely with MPs in adjacent constituencies, regardless of party.

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3. A third role of MPs, and one that is not strictly constituency oriented, is to give voice to the national policy concerns of constituents. These concerns vary widely with the nature of the constituency. The constituents in Mary Collins’s Capilano riding generated a huge number of policy-related letters, especially on economic policy. Psychologically, she observed a general distrust of Ottawa and so spent a lot of her time listening and explaining. Members go to great lengths to accommodate these concerns by organizing public meetings, making themselves available at accountability sessions and replying diplomatically to heavy correspondence. But all of those to whom we spoke rejected the idea that the role of the MP is to be the mouthpiece for the constituents. Jim Edwards for one remarked: “I don’t want to sound like a snob, but I would express my constituents’ views *except* when I think they were the wrong decisions in a moral or ethical sense.”
4. Finally we come to what can be described as the Member’s social role – attendance as a notable person at all sorts of events from dances to funerals. Brian Tobin said that these demands are particularly heavy in a rural riding: “With me the

expectation was that when there was a dinner/dance 200 miles up the peninsula, in the middle of winter, I would be there – and that next week I would be back.” Hard as these demands may be on an MP’s private life, they have political benefits in that rural Members have close personal ties with their constituents, ties that serve to insulate them against adverse political winds. Brian Tobin poetically revealed the other side of the coin when he talked about how his constituency focus helped him in the 1984 election. “The tide came in and the tide went out, but Tobin was still tied to the wharf.” And, he added, it was the constituents who tied the rope.

Keeping in Touch

The time spent in the riding was referred to again and again as the opportunity to keep in touch with the public. But the method and the means of doing so are never the same. Mary Collins told us that it was hard for her to get a message across in her riding. “There is no main street where you can go and everyone knows you. It is harder to get media coverage in an urban centre because they are not interested in a government backbencher. It is a challenge to get across to your constituents that you are doing something and trying to have an impact.”

To keep in touch, MPs increasingly reach out and communicate with their constituents rather than, as in the old days, sitting back waiting to hear from them. A variety of devices ranging from householders to newspaper columns to frequent letters are used. These aroused distinctly mixed emotions among the MPs we interviewed.

Gaston Isabelle and Dave Nickerson adhered to the sceptical school of thought. Isabelle argued that all the modern, electronic communicating is a futile attempt to compensate for the fact that MPs spend more and more of their time chasing shadows in Ottawa rather than with their constituents. “People don’t want letters. They want you. Being a modern MP is like dying on a mountaintop in Asia. No one will know you.” Dave Nickerson thought much of it was just a waste of time. “I’d sooner go and sit in a coffee shop or a bar and talk to the people. I personally read every letter that was sent to me and I drafted the replies.” As for householders and newspaper columns, Nickerson kept the former to a bare minimum of two per year and

refused to write the latter. “I would never read the things either.”

Geoff Scott was as enthusiastic about the new communications possibilities as Nickerson was critical. “My feeling is that people can’t get enough of it.” Scott explained that he had 50 towns and villages in his riding as well as a portion of the city of Hamilton. Many of these communities had small community papers and Scott wrote a column, *Report by Your MP*, which was carried by half a dozen of them. His background as a journalist made him a natural to keep in touch this way but he confessed to having learned caution in choosing his topics: “I would avoid certain hot topics. I stuck more to factual material on what the government was doing, although every once in a while I erupted. That was always good for three weeks of letters to the editor.”

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Written and electronic communications may be the easier side of keeping in touch. The harder side for some MPs is travel. Jim Fulton described himself as having the only constituency in the country that took two days to just get into. His trips, which he arranged in blocks of a week at a time, involved air travel, car and, not infrequently, boat. Brian Tobin described having to cover 800 kilometres of Newfoundland coastline. “I maintained a home and a vehicle in Newfoundland. Although this was a double cost, it was actually cheaper than renting a car and staying in a hotel.” But whatever method is chosen, it takes a tremendous toll. “If I didn’t have my family here in Ottawa, I’d never see them. I was almost forced to have my family live here if I wanted to see them.”

Rural and Urban Perspectives

There were sharply contrasting views between urban and rural members as to the adequacy of existing services for the constituency job. While Mary Collins admitted that she could use more money and staff, she acknowledged that it was unrealistic. Geoff Scott professed to be delighted with the support he gets. “It is

unbelievable – far better than adequate. I can only wonder how MPs ever functioned before.” Gaston Isabelle went so far as to say that he was obliged to spend more than he wanted, or needed, and complained that the system didn’t work: “We had so much staff and machinery that we didn’t have any time to do anything.” His only reason for having a constituency office was that other MPs did. “My opponent would have attacked me in the election if I had no office.”

The attitude of Members representing vast rural ridings was very different. Both Jim Fulton and Brian Tobin complained of an inflexible system that insufficiently met their special needs. While acknowledging that the allocations and expense-free allowances gave more money to rural than urban Members, Tobin felt it fell far short of compensating rural MPs. “Rural MPs need at least enough funds and staff to have one office in the south, one in the middle and one in the north of large ridings – even if it’s only on a part-time basis.”

Faced with the limitations of the system, MPs make increasing use of volunteers and informal networks. Jim Edwards had established policy advisory committees,

which he used as sounding boards and sources of policy ideas. Mary Collins described the executive of her riding association as “my first line of defence when it came to explaining what was happening in Ottawa.” And Jim Fulton had a complex network of friends and volunteers throughout his vast riding, who served as listening posts or answering services, this in addition to a full-time constituency office in one urban centre and a part-time office in another.

The Payoff

All Members to whom we spoke regarded constituency work as a major part of their responsibilities. It is also a prerequisite for continuing to serve in the House of Commons: a prerequisite, but by no means a guarantee. Brian Tobin argued that rural ridings do make heavy constituency demands – but these ridings are also more loyal politically. He pointed to a fundamental distinction that all Members would do well to keep in mind. “You are either a) their voice in Ottawa, or b) Ottawa’s voice in the riding. Once an MP spends more time on b) than on a) he or she is in trouble, whether they know it or not.”