

# Roles of the MP

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.

In interviews with current and former members of Parliament, *Parliamentary Government* solicited views on how a new MP should set priorities. Readers should bear in mind that personal and professional experience, motivation and parliamentary and party responsibilities all help shape the ultimate role of an individual MP.

Former New Democratic Party House Leader Ian Deans told *Parliamentary Government* that, “New Members and the people who send them to Ottawa tend to think that they have influence.” But Deans added after a pregnant pause: “You earn your influence. It doesn’t come automatically with the job.”

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Deans began his legislative career at Queen’s Park in 1967, shifted to federal politics in 1981, and later served as Chairperson of the Public Service Staff Relations Board. He cautioned that new MPs should be prepared to acknowledge “right off the top that you don’t know everything. If you try to take on some of the old timers, they will cut you to pieces and others will find you amusing.” Deans also suggested that new MPs not tie themselves up indeterminately in the House.

“To a large extent, you got elected by people who sent you there to be their representative. They want to see you and know you are doing things. They want to feel they are getting a bang for their buck. That means you have to be diligent about going back and working in the constituency. Not sloughing it off when there is a real problem: Mucking in with your sleeves rolled up and helping find solutions rather than giving platitudes and great speeches. A speech in the House of Commons is

nothing compared to standing up to your waist in water when somebody’s got a flood.”

Nevertheless, Deans said that some of his most satisfying experiences as an MP were making House speeches, especially those that received positive responses, and influencing the workings of the bureaucracy through committee work.

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“There is satisfaction in going into committee where you are meeting with the hierarchy of the public service and getting down to some nitty-gritty detail of a program which you think has been misdirected and getting the deputy minister to acknowledge, ‘Yeah, there are things that they can do better,’ and then they do them. You know you have arrived when they call you, not on the quiet, but in the open, and tell you they’ve decided to take this or that course of action because they know you are interested.”

## Earning Confidence

Deans said committees are a particularly important place for MPs to gain influence among peers because of their relatively small size, and because “committee members are judged on their merits rather than their politics usually.” MPs can earn the confidence of fellow committee members by demonstrating that they are prepared to work hard, are patient listeners, have a

certain level of competence in the subject matter, and are amenable to accepting variations to the course of action” that they may prefer.

Deans’ principal advice for new MPs from all parties was:

“Take a moment to try to understand what goes on. Try to understand where you can have an impact and remember that what you are going to raise has been raised at least once and sometimes hundreds of times before, and that the better your research the more likely you are to be taken account of by your peers. If you are going to raise something, don’t fly by the seat of your pants.”

Robert Stanfield, Conservative Leader of the Official Opposition from 1967 to 1976, suggested that new MPs quickly master the rules and procedures in the House “so that you feel at home at knowing what’s going on,” and become fluent in both official languages, if they have not already done so.

Stanfield also explained that Members must understand the issues, but cautioned against becoming too specialized. He used the example of Members who represent constituencies that are predominantly agricultural. While it is important that they understand agricultural issues, “to create an optimum future for themselves in the House, they should learn how to diversify or broaden their understanding; to train themselves to analyse problems other than those they have grown up with.”

John Reid, a former Liberal Minister, strongly urged new MPs to “do something for yourself. If you don’t decide what it is you would like to do, you may be sure in this environment that somebody else will tell you what to do. Make sure that you think about what it is you would like to accomplish while you are here and make sure you spend some of your time doing that. When I was here I took 10 per cent of the budgeted time that I had to spend in Ottawa and I did it for me. Out of that came a whole range of things. Remember to do things for you. Do things that are going to make you satisfied, not others satisfied.”

Liberal Thérèse Killens told *Parliamentary Government* that her main objective when she was first elected in 1979 for the Montreal riding of St-Michel-Ahuntsic was “to help people find solutions, because it is very

difficult to know on which door you have to knock when you have a problem, especially at the federal level. And I did accomplish that.”

Killens said that, at the time of her retirement, she had three staff in her Montreal constituency office. “People were phoning me because they knew I would not let them down. Never, never, never was a phone call unanswered. Never was a letter unanswered. I can guarantee that.” She stressed that for a new MP, the staff has to know what your priorities are.

Killens had words of praise for committee work, remembering her own work, particularly in prison reform as well as working on amendments to the Criminal Code provisions on prostitution.

“The policy that you are able to influence is always between second and third reading in parliamentary committees and in task forces. You do influence policies ... and there is definitely a very good feeling about it.”

### **What it Takes**

Killens said she would recommend both constituency and policy roles for new MPs, but warned that newcomers should be ready to put in about 80 hours a week of work “because that’s what it takes.”

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“You have to have good health. You have to enjoy your work as an MP. If you don’t enjoy your work anymore you shouldn’t be there.”

On the negative side of the ledger, Killens said she disliked “the circus of Question Period.” In a slightly more positive vein, routine House duty provided her with time to catch up on lagging correspondence. Killens allowed that while parliamentary stalling tactics are part and parcel of the political fray, “I found that waste of time the most frustrating thing in the job that we do. Talking for the sake of talking, I always did reluctantly.”

The soft-spoken mother of five noted that forgiveness is an indispensable quality when MPs become enmeshed in the confrontational aspects of politics. “If you are going to be effective you have to be able to

forgive. If you can't forgive, you don't sleep, and if you don't sleep you can't work."

Caucus is "good for the spirit," Killens said. In the depths of former Liberal Leader John Turner's battle with internal critics, caucus meetings were "beautifully honest. It's a good thing."

As for building credibility among colleagues, Killens suggested that newcomers will find, "it's not what you say that counts. It's who says it at the beginning. You have to establish your credibility before people will listen to you." To establish credibility with caucus colleagues and opponents, she said, "You have to be honest. People trust you if you are honest. I don't think there is any other way – honest with yourself and honest with your colleagues."

Former New Democrat MP Pauline Jewett, said that looking at all the tasks of an MP, "constituency work is undoubtedly tremendously important" in helping to address particular and general problems. The most satisfying experiences for Jewett were the occasions when a particular case led to the resolution of similar cases for a greater number of people through legislative change or changes in the application of government policy or regulations.

"At the Parliamentary end of things, while I have been fairly active in Question Period, and to some extent in the House, I found the committees by far the most fulfilling. My own committee experience has been enormously valuable and satisfying from the point of view of shaping the reports of a committee."

"The great satisfaction, I think, comes from being able to persuade your colleagues on the committee from the other parties of the value of both your understanding and your approach. Under the new rules, governments have to respond to committee recommendations. There's more a feeling that what you do on a committee doesn't die. There has been slightly better coverage of committee reports by the press than there used to be. But for new MPs who are anxious to make their name, you don't particularly make your name in a public way by what you do on a committee. It's not the way to get a TV news clip."

As for caucus involvement, Jewett said, "caucus is good at ironing out all kinds of little things," as well as being a forum for developing party policy stands.

Jewett, who was first elected in 1963, defeated in the 1965 and 1972 general elections, and then elected in 1979, 1980 and 1984, summed up by saying:

"My own strong feeling is that a new MP shouldn't take just one aspect of the job. He shouldn't just say I'm going to be only a constituency MP and get myself re-elected. I don't think that works at all. I remember something that Jack Pickersgill said years ago: 'Usually a good MP is both a good constituency MP and a good parliamentarian and an active person in his party. You are not just one of the three.'"

## **Building your Relations with the News Media**

For many members of Parliament, getting that much-needed media exposure at home in the riding can be a real struggle. Without local coverage, some constituents may decide their MP isn't doing the job he or she was elected for. That can mean a nasty surprise for an otherwise hard-working Member when the next election rolls around.

"I get more coverage out of other parts of Canada than from my riding in Regina," said Les Benjamin, the NDP Member for Regina West. Trying to get the local media interested in what he was doing in Ottawa wasn't easy, he said, even though the Regina Leader-Post had its own correspondent in the Press Gallery.

But Liberal MP Doug Frith (Sudbury) said it was easy to get local coverage. He just bypassed the Press Gallery and phoned media contacts in Sudbury.

"If I were asking an important question in Question Period this afternoon, I would phone the stations in Sudbury, tell them to take a feed, and I would be on the newscasts there all evening. I can get onto every media outlet in my riding within a matter of hours."

Frith said it can be an advantage to represent a smaller centre instead of a major metropolis, where it's often harder to make the news.

Jim Edwards agreed. The Conservative MP from Edmonton South said he had cordial contacts with Ottawa correspondents from the two Edmonton dailies and Independent Satellite News. He consulted them regularly, he said, but added that with six MPs from the Edmonton area, there was more competition for space. But it was still easier than for a rural Member.

“I have talked to Members from rural areas with maybe eight or 10 weekly papers in their ridings, and nothing else,” Edwards said. “Some of them find they have to submit columns to all of them. There’s a lot of extra work involved, but I’m sure it’s worth it in the long run.”

### **Challenges Faced by the Family**

When one takes up politics as a career, the family is inevitably caught up in the decision. *Parliamentary Government* spoke with some parliamentary spouses and partners about the effect of politics on the family.

“I never thought I’d marry a politician!” Though it is Judy Dick who was quoted here, many spouses and partners of members of Parliament have no doubt uttered a similar cry at one time or another. And in fact, most MPs’ spouses and partners didn’t marry politicians: they married doctors, teachers, farmers, lawyers, business executives. But whether they like it or not, their spouses and partners chose politics – and it soon becomes evident that politics brings changes into the life of the bedfellows!

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Said one spouse: “This is something *they* have chosen, and yet we have to cope with all the situations that result. I left my friends, my house, my children to come here. It’s something he has chosen – and I approve of that – but on the other hand, we are left wondering, what can we do?” Cecile Masse’s words bring into sharp focus the effects that public life has on the family: on the one hand, there are the expectations made of the spouse or partner and, on the other, the restrictions imposed.

One doesn’t assume the responsibilities of public office alone. Constituents often expect to have two people working for them, according to some spouses and partners. Kristin Frith, for example, told us that, “often when Doug couldn’t accept invitations, they were being sent to me, expecting me to be there. My husband told me not to start a precedent – after all, I’m not the

elected member of Parliament, and I shouldn’t be filling in for him.”

Kate Schellenberg assumed a very active role alongside her MP husband, Ted. She managed his campaign and worked in his Ottawa office. “I find that I have picked up a few projects and been able to really help the different groups in our riding. But I have to go carefully because there are some constituents who remind you that you are not the member of Parliament. Others really appreciate my involvement.”

While active and direct involvement by the spouse or partner is not always the case, it seems to be, in effect, one way of coping with the special situation in which the spouses and partners of MPs find themselves. Often, they are asked to attend functions with their spouse or partner, and as the MP’s own responsibilities increase so do the demands on the time of the spouse or partner. Judy Dick commented that, “In the riding, you are a glorified secretary.” This is because when constituents elect a person, it is expected that the MP will be “accessible – almost completely accessible – day and night.” And so, after hours, after the constituency office is closed, at 7 a.m. on a Sunday, or at 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night, the constituents will not hesitate to call. And if they cannot reach the Member, someone close to the Member will do – and the closer the better.

The spouses and partners, particularly those in the riding, are never immune from the knocks of politics. Kate Schellenberg maintained that “the stress in the passenger seat is far greater than in the driver’s seat, because the Members are the ones doing it. *They* are in control.” Judy Dick agreed: “My husband being in politics has put a lot of restrictions on me. It has changed my life and yet it is not my thing. I seem to suffer all the stresses, yet I cannot go and sit in the House of Commons.”

Judy, like Kristin Frith, had worked previously on the Hill, and so knew what the life of an MP involved. But, as Kristin noted: “The hardest thing for me was going from a really active role in policy-making to a non-active role. We have a political role that we are expected to play, but it’s not that active. I don’t like to admit it, but we are an appendage, we are in a secondary role, and for some of us it has been a real uprooting. I’ve been very much a career person, and, of course, it is very difficult to find a job, because as an MP’s spouse

there is that whole grey area of what we can and cannot do.”

Well, if there is one thing that the spouse or partner often *cannot* do, it is get away from the constituents any more than an MP. Judy Dick: “I knew what the life of an MP was about, having worked on the Hill. But I was not in my way prepared for the pulls and tugs that the constituents make. I must take 20, 25 telephone calls a day, all day, all night. I’ve been attacked at my door. I’ve had our phone tapped and cut off the wall. I cannot get away from it.”

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Judy’s situation was perhaps more intense because her husband’s riding was in the Ottawa area and for her, “there is no getting away from it. Paul’s constituents expect him all week, whether the House is sitting, whether there’s a committee meeting or a trip, the expectation is that he can attend easily, and that he should be there.” For those spouses and partners who left the riding behind to be in Ottawa with their husbands, there is admittedly a real freedom, one that Judy Dick never enjoyed. Donna Wenman explained: “When I am in Ottawa, I am anonymous. I walk down the street, and nobody knows me, nobody knows my husband.” When she goes back to the riding, however, “Oh, that is a different story. What we go through in the riding is exactly like what Judy goes through here. I can’t walk a block down the street without someone stopping me. My son used to refuse to run to the store with his dad because he knew he’d be gone an hour. But that is what you’ve been working for over the years – you want everyone in town to know who you are.”

The spouses and partners rely on a dose of one-part humour, one-part political realism to deal with these constant demands from constituents. Caroline Rompkey was quick to note: “You cannot ignore these people because they are the ones that are going to elect you.” And, as Cecile Masse added, “If it didn’t happen, you would be worried.”

Perhaps because she lived here in Ottawa and not in the riding, Kate Schellenberg, however, found that it was not the demands of constituents that represented the greatest adjustment for her: “The stresses and strains are not necessarily connected to the riding as much as to the fact that I am functioning like a single parent a lot of the time.”

Cecile Masse agreed that this was an added strain: “My husband works 52 weeks a year, seven days a week. He is always working. It’s hard to say if it is more difficult for MPs’ families when the children are grown up already or when the children are younger. I know that when my children were young, I had to do everything, almost raise them on my own.”

Donna Wennan found that this responsibility changed her: “I found I became very independent as a result. I was managing the home front.” This poses its own special problems, because, as Donna added, the spouse or partner does not ultimately really have the freedom of the single parent. “We have to include them in the family problems and decisions, even if they’re not there.” One MP, Mike Forrestall, admitted, “Being in politics has cost me a family. I don’t know my oldest daughter.”

Kate Schellenberg found this tough and maintained that if it weren’t for the daily telephone calls, the situation would be unbearable. For wherever the family is, in Ottawa or in the riding, the MP’s time and energy is split between the two places and it is often impossible – financially if for no other reason – to take the family along at all times.

It is this that perhaps puts the biggest strain on the family of MPs, children as well as spouses and partners. Some children have known nothing else: although it is certainly difficult to adjust to having a parent in public office, being “born into a political milieu” often helps. As Judy Dick pointed out: “With my kids, their father has been a Member since they were six weeks old. They are almost indifferent.”

Caroline Rompkey, however, wondered if the children ever get used to it.

“I find my children – when they were younger, and even now – go out of their way to make sure no one knows who their father is.”

It is not surprising that many spouses and partners choose to come to Ottawa: even though it often

involves an uprooting it appears to be less stressful on the family in the long run, for a variety of reasons.

For one thing it is a way to see your spouse or partner every day. Many spouses find that the lack of time spent with their husbands is the most difficult adjustment.

Donna Wenman used to live in the riding, but eventually decided to move to Ottawa:

“For three, almost four years, I would pick up my husband at the plane on Thursday or Friday, we would have the whole hour from the airport to the house, I would sit beside him at church and then I would drive him back to the airport and we would have another hour. And that was it. Weekends were constituency times.”

The number of MPs’ families living in Ottawa has increased substantially since 1972, according to Judy Dick. For some, like the Rompkeys, it was “just the only sensible, simple thing to do. We were so far away from Ottawa and it was so difficult to get to our riding. And it also suited us well because part of our riding is on the island of Newfoundland. The other

part is on the mainland, which is all of Labrador, and if we had lived on the island part we would have offended Labrador, and if we had chosen to live in Labrador, Newfoundland would have been offended.”

Many spouses and partners see moving to Ottawa as a way to make things less stressful on the children, who are more in “a fishbowl when they are in the riding than when they are here in Ottawa. Here, it’s not as big a deal if your dad or mom is an MP.” For others, living in Ottawa is a way to escape the constant call of the constituents and to maintain some semblance of family life. But as regards the choice of where the family is based, one MP noted that “neither arrangement is satisfactory, whether they are here or there.”

Most MPs were quick to point out that public life would be hard without the support of the family. And there is no doubt that the family of the MP is integrally caught up in the pressures of the office. Peter Rompkey illustrated this best when, at the age of nine, he sighed and asked: “Mom, have I been in politics all my life?”