SPECIAL EDITION OF

PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

FEBRUARY 2006

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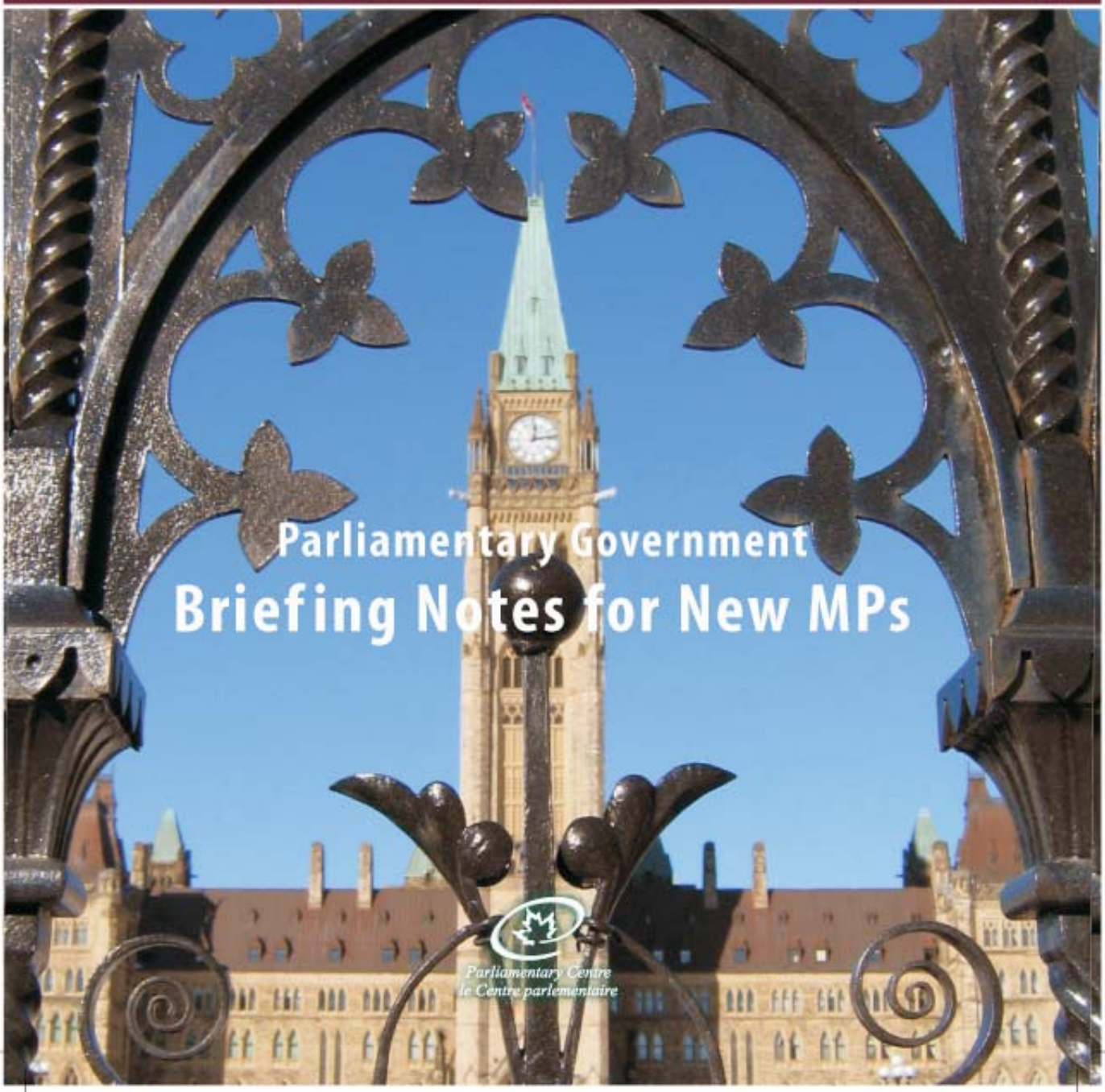

A global leader in the field of parliamentary development, the **Parliamentary Centre** is a Canadian not-for-profit organization devoted to improving the effectiveness of representative assemblies and governance mechanisms in Canada and around the world.

Since 1978, the Centre has published *Parliamentary Government*, a quarterly magazine devoted to reporting on developments affecting the operations of Parliament, reviewing practices that might improve its work and discussing challenges faced by Members.

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Peter C. Dobell, the Founding Director of the Centre, established the Parliamentary Centre in 1968 with the goal of improving the efficacy of Parliament. Under his direction the Centre initiated the first training seminar for newly-elected MPs in 1979. Mr. Dobell now devotes his attention to observing and commenting on developments in the Canadian Parliament and suggesting ways that House of Commons committees might be more effective.

Robert Marleau is the new Chair of the Board of Directors of the Parliamentary Centre. Mr Marleau has had a long and distinguished career in the service of the Parliament of Canada. In July 1987 he was appointed Clerk of the House of Commons, a position he held until July 2000. In recognition of his exceptional service, on his retirement the House of Commons by unanimous resolution made Mr Marleau an Honorary Officer of the House.

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The Mission of the Parliamentary Centre is to assist legislatures in building their capacity as effective democratic institutions and to assist legislators in realizing their potential for parliamentary leadership. The Parliamentary Centre focuses its work particularly on:

- Strengthening committee oversight and lawmaking;
- Supporting global and regional inter-parliamentary networks;
- Building the capacity of parliamentary secretariats;
- Supporting legislative development at the state and provincial, and national levels;
- Strengthening the role of political parties in the legislature and;
- Developing parliamentary performance planning and reporting systems.

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SPECIAL EDITION OF PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

BRIEFING NOTES FOR NEW MEMBERS

FEBRUARY 2006

Briefing Notes for New MPs

Introduction

Congratulations on your election as a Member of Parliament! The purpose of the orientation program provided by the House of Commons is to introduce you to a job unlike any other you have ever done. This issue of *Parliamentary Government* is intended to complement the orientation program by focusing on aspects of the job that the new Member will confront right from the start. The essays that follow have been drawn from past issues of *Parliamentary Government* published by the Parliamentary Centre with the support of the House of Commons. Members of Parliament referred to in the essays will in many instances now be former Members of Parliament.

Robert Miller
Executive Director
The Parliamentary Centre

Inside

Foreword

On behalf of the Board and staff of the Parliamentary Centre, I congratulate you on your election as a member of Parliament. From long experience working in the House of Commons, I know that you are entering one of the most exciting and challenging periods of your life.

There are many resources available to you in carrying out your responsibilities as an MP, beginning with your own staff, House of Commons staff and the research and information resources of the Library of Parliament. In addition, I want to make you aware of the work of the Parliamentary Centre, an independent organization that undertakes research and training programs in support of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

This collection of Briefing Notes for New MPs is drawn from the Parliamentary Centre's magazine *Parliamentary Government* and is designed to complement the orientation program provided by the House of Commons.

We at the Parliamentary Centre look forward to working with you in the years ahead. In the meantime, our best wishes for your important work on behalf of the people of Canada.

Robert Marleau
Chairman of the Board
The Parliamentary Centre

The First Days of a Parliament

The opening of a new Parliament is a very busy time for all Members of Parliament. For newly elected Members it can also be a somewhat bewildering experience. Members participate in a number of major events, both public and private, and many less dramatic, though no less important ones. In the first months, Members will also endeavour to learn as quickly as possible how to function efficiently and effectively, while coping with all of the other demands made on them. In the longer term, Members will want to acquire a feel for the parliamentary traditions and practices that make being a Member of the House of Commons unique.

Even before the House convenes and Parliament settles down to work, Members will participate in their first official function, their swearing in. In the first few days that the new Parliament actually sits, three other major events will occur – election of the Speaker, the Speech from the Throne, and the beginning of the debate on the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne. It may be that during the Address Debate, as it is called, a newly elected Member will pronounce his or her maiden speech.

Elected Members take the Oath in order to take their seats in the House, in an ancient ceremony that normally takes no more than fifteen minutes.

Soon after, the three major events listed above occur in quick succession. First, at the beginning of the new Parliament, when the House assembles, the Members choose a Speaker in an election conducted by secret ballot, a procedure used for the first time in September 1986. The Standing Orders, or rules of the House, set out a voting procedure that is followed, through several ballots if necessary, until a candidate has received a majority of the votes cast.

Speech from the Throne

After a Speaker has been elected, usually on the following day, the House proceeds to the Senate Chamber to hear the Governor General read the Speech from the Throne. The Speech imparts the causes of summoning Parliament, prior to which neither the House nor the Senate can proceed with any public business. The Speech from the Throne formally opens the first session or any subsequent sessions of a Parliament, and marks the first occasion of "Parliament Assembled" in its three constituent parts: the House of Commons, the Senate and the Sovereign or the Sovereign's representative. After the Speech from the Throne, the Speaker and Members return to the House.

Following certain formal and organizational proceedings, the Prime Minister makes a motion that the Speech from the Throne be considered either this day or on some future day. As the motion for the Address in Reply itself is relatively unspecific, debate is very wide-ranging, which provides one of the few opportunities for private Members to speak on topics of their choice.

It may be during the Address Debate that a newly elected Member makes his or her maiden speech. By old parliamentary usage, a Member who wishes to make his or her maiden speech enjoys the privilege of being the first to "catch the Speaker's eye" if he rises at the same time as Members who are not newly elected. Tradition permits a Member making a maiden speech to use a written text, a practice discouraged in other instances.

Proceedings

After these first few fast-paced days, a more regularized program of business begins, during which Members have numerous opportunities to participate actively and publicly. A typical day in the House begins with "Routine Proceedings" at 10 a.m., whereby documents are tabled, reports made, petitions presented and bills introduced. After Routine Proceedings, the House moves to "Government Orders" until 2:00 p.m. when, for 15 minutes, Members recognized by the Speaker may make oral statements for 60 seconds on a topic of their choice. At 2:15 p.m. Question Period begins, providing Members with the opportunity to question the Ministry on various aspects of government policy

and matters of topical concern. Question Period is one of the most public operations of responsible government, in that Ministers answer to the House for the conduct of their departments and for the decisions contemplated or taken by the Government. At 3:00 p.m. the House takes up Government Orders again. From 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. (11:00 a.m. to noon on Mondays), the time is given over to "Private Members' Business", when the House debates bills and motions sponsored by Members not of the Ministry. At 6:30 p.m., the "Adjournment Proceedings" take place, giving Members an opportunity to debate, in some detail, answers that were given during Question Period. Three such question-and-answer exchanges take place, for 10 minutes each, after which (7:00 p.m.) the House adjourns for the day. The order of proceedings is somewhat different on Wednesdays and Fridays.

This brief and admittedly sketchy explanation of the House practices and procedures might appear to make becoming an effective Member of Parliament a daunting task for a new Member. Fortunately, there are many people to whom new Members can turn for help in adjusting to their new roles and responsibilities.

The Speaker acts in a non-partisan and impartial capacity in upholding the Standing Orders, and may be consulted on procedural and other matters. The Clerk of the House is the chief procedural adviser to the Speaker and to Members of the House. The Clerk is also responsible for a wide range of duties relating to the proceedings and official records of the House and its committees. Assisting the Clerk are the Deputy Clerk and other Table Officers – Clerk Assistants, Principal Clerks and Deputy Principal Clerks – as well as the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel and the Deputy Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel. These men and women are always available to provide assistance to Members.

Unfortunately, space does not allow a full elaboration of the many subjects touched upon in this short article. There will be plenty of opportunity, however, for new Members to ask questions and receive more complete information at the "Orientation for Newly Elected Members", a series of briefing sessions organized by all branches of the House at the beginning of each new Parliament. It is hoped the briefings, which are designed to guide new Members in virtually all areas of their new responsibilities, will make the Members' time in Ottawa both memorable and more productive.

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."

"Work in Parliament, once you have learned the ropes, is an integral part of developing your reputation, but it's only one part: Remember not everyone watches Question Period. Not everyone reads the paper."

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.

"Work in Parliament, once you have learned the ropes, is an integral part of developing your reputation, but it's only one part: Remember not everyone watches Question Period. Not everyone reads the paper."

"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."

"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."

"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!

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 parners about the effect of politics on the family.

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."

"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'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?"

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 from 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.

A question that arises is whether in lobbying for their constituencies, it is an advantage to be a government or an opposition MP

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."

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

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."

The New MP and Committees

Why Think of Committees as a Way to Have an Impact?

Although Members of Parliament must allocate their time in Ottawa between duties in the House, and caucus and committee meetings, it is in committee work that most newly elected Members can add the most value. This note outlines, on the one hand, how Members can be most effective in committees and, on the other, how they can work with colleagues to make committees more effective.

In committees, MPs can exercise each of the three core roles of their parliamentary mandate: ***as legislator***, reviewing and amending legislation; ***as overseer***, reviewing government policies, programs and expenditures; and ***as representative,*** hearing the various voices of citizens and working with colleagues to develop a consensus around collective public interests of Canadians. Although these three roles are central, they are not always evident to the ordinary citizen. MPs are at times portrayed in the news media as the rabid partisans of Question Period who rubber-stamp the dictates of their party. However, they also are seen as caseworkers assisting constituents with information and advice on their dealings with government. While working actively with party colleagues and assisting constituents are important parts of the job, the core democratic responsibilities are citizen representation, oversight, and legislation – responsibilities that can be addressed best in committees. A challenge for new Members is not only to make this important part of the job effective, but also to make it more visible to Canadians. Diligently pursuing their work in committees provides a good way for new MPs to contribute to better governance, which may also help to improve the public image of the effectiveness of the Parliament in Canada.

While votes in the House and their coverage in the news media are significant, it is in committees that a Member can thoughtfully deliberate with colleagues to develop positions on legislation and other policy issues, hear the views of ordinary Canadians and experts, and pose questions to Ministers and officials with a reasonable hope of obtaining relevant information. It is also the forum where Members can develop further expertise in a policy area and work with knowledgeable colleagues. In the 38th Parliament, 18 of the 20 Standing Committees specialized in different policy areas. It is for these reasons that committees are one of the most important mechanisms available for refining legislation in a process that is seen by citizens as legitimate, for making government operations and finances more transparent, and for developing a shared understanding of Canadian interests.

How Committees Work?

In the Canadian system, there are two main kinds of committees through which the House conducts its business: (For details, consult "*Committees a Practical Guide*, House of Commons, Sixth Edition, 2001)

1. Standing committees are permanently mandated by the House to oversee a government department or departments, or to exercise procedural and other responsibilities related to the House itself. They have extensive powers of inquiry to undertake the detailed consideration of legislation, estimates and other matters in their areas of jurisdiction. Three of these are joint committees with the Senate: Scrutiny of Regulations, Library of Parliament and Official Languages. (Although there are provisions in the Standing Orders for legislative committees, this work is typically handled by standing committees.)Special committees, after completing a particular study at the request of the House, are then disbanded.
2. The Procedure and House Affairs Committee proposes the membership in each committee (as well as lists of associate members, that is, potential substitutes) after consultation with House Leaders. Individual MPs are informally asked for their preferences in terms of membership in a committee, but may not necessarily get their choices. The final membership reflects the party standings in the House, as well as party strategy. For

example, the governing party will usually ensure that the Parliamentary Secretary assigned to the department(s) monitored by that committee is included and each opposition party will assign the relevant critic.

After the adoption of the report on committee membership in the House, each committee as a first order of business elects – by secret ballot since a decision in 2003 – a chair and two vice chairs. Of these three positions, two usually are members of the oppostion party and the third a member from the governing party. In minority parliaments, this arrangement may be modified by agreement among parties. Committees then begin to organize their work by adopting a series of routine administrative motions. Most committees create a steering sub-committee, also called a sub-committee on agenda and procedure, which develops the committee's work plans and recommends them for approval by the full committee. Each committee will have the support of a committee clerk from the Committees Branch of the House, and a researcher from the Library of Parliament.

Standing committees, in addition to reviewing legislation referred to them, are empowered to study and report on all matters relating to the mandate, management and operations of the departments of government assigned to them. The most complete and updated documentation on departments is the package called the annual Estimates. The government's expenditure plans for the forthcoming three fiscal years, a part of the Estimates, are referred automatically to the relevant standing committees. This is where members can best develop a thorough understanding of what the government is actually doing and spending within the committee's area of oversight. It also provides to committee members a direct role in exercising stewardship of the "public purse" by analysing budgets and scrutinizing allocation of resources, as well as reviewing departmental performance.

Other powers of a standing committee include matters such as: a) initiating inquiries and preparing reports and recommendations on any public policy issue related to its mandate; b) reviewing order-in-council appointments; c) sending for persons, papers and records; and d) publishing papers and evidence. Although committees can also retain professional and support staff in addition to the regular staff assigned to support their work, this power is constrained by the budgets allocated to committees, a matter handled by the Liaison Committee. The Liaison Committee, which includes the chairs of all committees, allocates resources to committees. It also, on occasion, undertakes studies of matters related to the collective interests of House committees.

Dealing with the Practical Constraints

The key constraints on committees, as identified by participants and expert observers, include: strong party discipline, particularly that of the governing party; time; and resources. However, the skill of chairs in handling committee management and operations, and the approach of individual members to their participation on committees are also important. Party discipline, although broadly seen as the most important impediment, and the skills of chairs cannot be usefully addressed in this note, which focuses on newly elected Members. The other matters, however, can be influenced by individual committee members.

Time and resources: While there are real time constraints on committee meetings, some time is poorly used by procedures that the committee can change, as well as by the behaviour of individual members. Questions and other interventions by committee members at hearings sometimes disrupt a fair and complete hearing of witnesses. Procedures can be established to reduce the time used by witnesses repeating material already provided in documentation or by ineffective committee questioning practices. Time also is used inefficiently if each committee study or activity is treated as a separate item. A policy study often covers material that could be addressed in a review of Estimates expenditure plans or performance reports. Developing a work plan for the entire sitting or for a full year is one way to make better use of the time devoted to hearings. While it might be difficult for a new member to change committee time management procedures, it might be possible to get the agreement of your colleagues on the committee to hold a meeting a couple of months downstream to review such matters. You might also suggest that the committee seek to establish a couple of objectives and subsequently monitor and discuss (and perhaps report on) its performance related to those objectives.[1]

While resources in the short run might be less amenable to adjustment, there might be opportunities to change the way assigned resources are used or to access

additional resources. In some situations, it is in the interest of departments to ensure a good understanding of certain issues. The Parliamentary Secretary on the committee might be able to arrange for briefings by departmental experts. Party resources are sometimes provided to members sitting on specific committees. A periodic look at resource availability and actual usage might help.

Your personal approach: While getting value from a poorly performing committee can be very difficult, it is important that leadership on a committee not be seen as solely the job of the chair or the governing party. Particularly at the opening of a new Parliament, there is greater openness to working positively with all colleagues on committee, at least in part because there are other new members eager to undertake the important role they have acquired. Moreover, there often will be colleagues, not just from your own party, who are anxious to take extra steps to make Parliament work better. With energy, skill, a positive approach and a little luck, you will find colleagues to work with on the committee to make it more effective.

The principal criticism of witnesses about appearing before committees is a combination of either inadequate preparation by members (they did not seem to know what information they wanted), or that members did not appear to want any information (they were more interested in taking verbal jabs at each other). Three suggestions have been offered by members and observers. First, members should prepare themselves so they know what information they are seeking, and they should provide guidance to Library of Parliament staff about what briefing material is needed. Second, committees should meet before calling witnesses, and discuss the range of issues they wish to cover and ask staff to convey their interests to witnesses. This helps witnesses prepare and it helps members to clarify in their own minds exactly what they are seeking. Third, members should be diligent in attending meetings and in arriving on time. Lack of continuity in a series of meetings or a single meeting can lead to repetition of questions and the frustration of your colleagues.

Some stress has developed in recent years regarding witnesses from the public service. The public service interpretation of its members' role at committees can be at variance with the expectations of committee members. Officials represent their Minister before a committee. They feel able to answer questions of fact and to explain the kinds of analysis and debate around an issue. They, however, should not be expected to justify the government's policy, a question that should be addressed to the Minister. However, some officials give committees the impression that they are unwilling to provide information. Whether this is due to lack of experience, Ministerial direction, or a lack of understanding of Parliament's role is difficult to determine.[2] Whatever the reason, committees through their chairs should seek to convey their dissatisfaction with such behavior to the Minister either directly or through the Parliamentary Secretary.

Closing Observation

Committee members have expressed a high level of frustration in recent years. It is not so much a case of committees not producing worthwhile results. Rather, it appears to be a case of producing less than they feel they could. Committees have enormous potential to make the parliamentary arm of government more effective. They provide a formal forum for engaging citizens on public policy, for sorting out essential differences and forging consensus on an appropriate balance, and can be an instrument for making government transparent in a balanced manner. There are many ideas on how to bridge the expectations-reality gap and broad agreement among members on these matters. Many of these ideas are described in the resource documents listed in the next section. But from the perspective of a new MP, the words below of Reg Alcock at a May 10, 2000, meeting of MPs on the Hill (see Document 3 below) are particularly constructive:

> *" . . . The truth is that we own the place. If we want these changes to occur, we can make them occur, regardless of what others want. I was just thinking, you know, it would be possible for us to implement these changes. It just takes a majority of the Members of the House. . . ."*

Further Documentation

In addition to the expertise and documentation available from the Library of Parliament, a number of papers are available through the Parliamentary Centre website **www.parlcent.ca**.

1. *Parliamentary Government*, *Report of the Liaison Committee on Committee Effectiveness*, June 1993. This

report, although prepared more than 10 years ago, contains a number of recommendations and some relevant information on committee activity at that time. As such, it provides an excellent base for comparison with more recent assessments.

2. *Parliamentary Government*, *Committee Effectiveness*, September 1997. This is an update of the previous Liaison Committee report, and includes a number of additional recommendations.

3. Institute for Research on Public Policy, Policy Matters, *Reforming Parliamentary Practice*, December 2000, by Peter Dobell.

4. *Parliamentary Government*, *MPs' Views on Committee Organization*, March 2001. Although it is not a formal committee report and doesn't contain formal recommendations, it does include updated impressions of committee effectiveness and the recommendation of experienced MPs, most of whom were still active in the 38th Parliament.

5. Institute for Research on Public Policy, Policy Matters, *Parliament's Performance in the Budget Process: A Case Study*, May 2002, by Peter Dobell and Martin Ulrich.

6. Parliamentary Centre Backgrounder, *The New Member of Parliament and Committees*, 2005, by Amelita Armit. This is a more detailed version of the current note prepared for new Members in the 38th Parliament.

7. Parliamentary Centre Backgrounder, *Public Accounts Committee: An Interim Summary Report on its Roles, Products and Results*, 2005 by Martin Ulrich. This is an exploratory evaluation of the Public Accounts Committee during the 37th Parliament, as requested by that committee.

[1] Tracking and reporting on committee performance is a matter of particular interest to the Parliamentary Centre. It would be willing to brief the committee or individual Members to suggest how that might be pursued.

[2] Particularly interesting and a likely contributing factor in some cases is the attitude officials take to Parliament. In a poll of public servants, reported by Peter Dobell in IRPP Policy Matters, Reforming Parliamentary Practice, 2000, on the relevant importance of various influences on policy development, parliamentary committees and MPs ranked almost at the bottom of 13 different sources of influence and, at times, were referred to as a minor process obstacle.

Managing Staff and Offices for Better Results and Fewer Headaches

Well into her second term, an MP who prided herself on her constituency work, learned that complaints to her office were increasing. The complaints involved missed weekend functions, unanswered e-mail queries, and immigration inquiries that had been ignored, among other things. The situation surprised the Member because both her Ottawa and riding offices had run smoothly in her first term, and she had established a good relationship with her constituents. Occasionally during her first term, the MP had been asked to intervene in more complex or sensitive situations, but normally her staff handled cases quickly and competently.

Disturbed by the increase in complaints, the MP investigated and quickly discovered the cause.

Following the second election, the MP's experienced office manager in Ottawa had retired for personal reasons. Having just won a hotly contested race, the Member turned to Richard, her campaign manager. Impressed by Richard's performance during the campaign, the Member did not hesitate to offer him the position of office manager in Ottawa. On assuming office, Richard recommended that an administrative assistant in the constituency office be replaced, advice that the MP accepted without question.

The source of the poor office performance became apparent to the Member when she checked how the casework was being handled, and examined more closely how Richard worked. While he was competent in marketing and generating new ideas, he lacked the administrative experience needed in an MP's office. Management of on-going operations and disciplined follow-up, crucial to providing constituents with quality service, did not interest him. In addition, the assistant he had recommended for the riding office was much less able then her predecessor.

So, Who's the Boss?

Managing a small, highly challenged staff is now an inescapable part of an MP's job. People management is an area where practices and approaches have undergone major shifts. "Boss" does not have quite the same ring it used to have. The employee-employer relationship is no longer characterized by the familiar top-down culture of not so long ago.

The lines between supervisor and employee are much less clear than they once were. More co-operative modes are now the norm, which means teamwork, participation, consultation, and consideration for the individual employee. The effect? Managing people is more complicated or, at a minimum, radically different.

What Went Wrong?

The immediate conclusion to the scenario described above would be to say the Member misjudged Richard's ability and made a bad choice. This is undeniable, but replacing Richard was really only part of the solution. The Member had been fortunate during her first term in finding a skilled office manager who needed no supervision. She had not learned the importance of monitoring the standard of service provided by doing regular follow-up, maintaining communication with riding staff and using other management tools to detect and address problems.

The multitude of demands on MPs requires making maximum and efficient use of all resources at their disposal. Experienced MPs readily acknowledge that on a day-to-day basis, their personnel is central to their good performance. Yet, many newly elected MPs have not in their previous work acquired the management skills required for the new job. After an election, the whirlwind of political and parliamentary activities quickly takes over their lives, making it hard to find time to hire competent and congenial staff to establish a smooth-running and constituent-friendly office operation.

The object of solid staff management is to establish, maintain, and improve the delivery of service to constituents, and to support the performance of the

MP in all facets of the job. This brief overview of practical and proven ideas and practices could help newly elected MPs to set up and maintain effective office support, and to help them evaluate their performance as people managers.

MPs have an exceptional advantage in recruiting staff for their offices and in building the support and service team that suits them. In today's work world it is a rare manager who can pick her or his staff, even when they only number five or six. Hiring individuals is your very best chance to put your imprint on the way the office will operate, on which services will have priority and on the results you want. That alone should be argument enough for Members to give time, effort and care to build the team that satisfies their own criteria. Managers rarely regret investing effort and attention to bring the right people on board. The opposite is not true.

You may get advice from your party secretariat, colleagues, personal acquaintances and others on specific candidates. But never forget that the final decision to offer someone a job on your personal staff is yours to make, and that the choice will affect your performance on the new job.

Here's What This Job's About: Do You Understand?

Finding competent and productive employees is a challenge for all managers. What is special in the case of MPs is the inherently personal relationship between employee and boss. In the public service or in private enterprise, employees report to a boss or supervisor who is in fact also an employee in the vast majority of instances. In a Member's environment there is no such distinction. Employer and "boss" are synonymous. In addition, an MP's staff does not reflect on a department, company or product, but on the very person of the parliamentarian. In our opening scenario, Richard's mediocre performance had a direct impact on the MP and seriously jeopardized her reputation, influence and, potentially, even votes in the next election.

Consider another scenario:

> *A well-intentioned staffer, seeking to accelerate the response to information requests or casework from government departments would regularly punctuate his request for help with departmental officials by alleging that his first-term MP was irritated at the slowness of the response. He would assert that his MP was quite "upset at the lack of co-operation shown" by the government contacts, and would "personally bring this lack of co-operation to the attention of the Minister." This approach did not fit the Member's style and was not in fact directed by him. Rather than impressing departmental workers, the impact of the tactic was to generate increasing irritation that weakened the Member's ability to help constituents cut through red tape. As a consequence, casework suffered and the MP developed a reputation for being ineffective in helping constituents. The staffer's high-handed and ill-advised approach negatively influenced the departmental response to all requests emanating from the office of this Member.*

When first organizing their offices, Members will receive the publication *Organizing Your Ottawa and Constituency Offices,* which focuses on the administrative considerations of setting up those offices. This article focuses not on those aspects but, more importantly, on the individuals who will actually deliver the goods.

Members of Parliament will want to find employees who understand and have the capacity to represent a parliamentarian's views and priorities convincingly. Professional or job-specific competence is but a part of the skills-set needed to be effective and productive in working for an MP.

Bear in mind that the selection process, from establishing the positions required, identifying good potential candidates through to the selection of staff, has a direct and major impact on how well you will do your job or even be seen to be doing it. The process demands a lot of a new Member's time and concentration. Making the time available is equally crucial when filling a vacant post, because of the effect a new team member can have on an established work team. Even when an excellent employee leaves, in spite of the extra work and the added administrative burden, filling a vacant position always presents an ideal opportunity to re-evaluate how the office team is performing.

An MP was discouraged at losing an extremely capable office manager. To fill the vacancy he pressed his legislative assistant, who very competently handled research and advisory tasks as well as working on computer problems, to accept the position of office manager. The legislative assistant resisted the pressure and insisted on doing a detailed review of office operations. The result was the hiring of a new manager who was both computer-knowledgeable and a first-class administrator. As a result, the legislative assistant had more time to do in-depth projects for the Member and the overall performance of the office even improved.

The recruitment stage usually has a dominant effect on the ultimate performance of a Member's personal support team. The importance of doing it right cannot be over-emphasized. Recruitment efforts should go beyond just finding a competent person to accomplish a series of tasks, but should also involve consideration of how the candidate will help to create a coherent unit working collectively to promote the Member's goals. BOX A summarizes important elements to keep in mind when looking for staff.

Members have a number of options in the types of employment they can offer their personal staff. They can, for example, choose to offer full-time and long-term employment, casual work or short-term contracts. Thinking through the type of employment is crucial because of possible implications. Some Members have been known to resort to a "probationary arrangement" as a sort of test period on the assumption that the Member is free to end the employee's contract for any reason during the probationary period. This approach and others of a similar ilk may be tempting, but they can be hazardous if the employee is not treated fairly and given sufficient opportunity to improve. Before adopting such an approach, Members should consult Legal Counsel to obtain a clear understanding of the implications.

BOX A: When Looking for New Staff…

- Consider important recommendations and references, but make the choice yours. Ensure that the candidate satisfies your requirements, not anyone else's.
- Take the time to determine both the qualifications and the qualities of the individual you wish to hire. The two cannot be separated in a Member's office environment.
- Decide whether you are seeking political affiliation or competence. If a position is vacant, ask your staff what type of individual and skills they consider are needed. Do some comparison-shopping no matter how strongly a candidate is recommended. Check references and consult former employers rigorously.
- Resumés give you the information the candidate wants to profile. Take the necessary measures to gather the information you want.
- Do serious selection interviews that deal with job-related matters, not peripheral ones.
- Invite a second person experienced in staffing and the work of an MP's office to conduct the interview with you.
- At the interview, commit to nothing that is not essential. Give yourself time and flexibility to reflect and adjust. If you have any doubt whatsoever about a candidate, do not hire.
- Before deciding on the full-time, casual, short-term or other option, make sure you understand exactly the obligations related to the considered option.

Where Do I Start?

Assuming that the employees on staff have been carefully selected and have the combination of talent, know-how and drive to go a good job, the challenge is to maintain their interest or, better still, to improve their skills and increase their productivity. What factors influence an employee's ability and willingness to perform well? It can vary widely from the physical surroundings, the availability of adequate office material and technical equipment, the human or social atmosphere of the workplace, and the reputation and image of the "boss" Member.

An MP's most reliable tool for obtaining strong employee performance is the capacity to motivate. A motivated individual will often surprise with unexpected superior results, as ambitious and energetic Members' employees have shown on many occasions.

Managers generally recognize the importance of motivation for employees, but taking concrete steps to motivate personnel requires time and effort. In the dynamic environment of the political and parliamentary world in which MPs work, employees can be stimulated by encouragement and by genuine interest in how the office team or individuals accomplish their tasks and make tangible contributions.

An MP of long standing recollects a case that should have been handled quite differently. A junior staff person enjoyed looking after the Member's schedule But this responsibility was jealously guarded by a more senior administrative staffer who believed it conferred on him a certain status. As it turned out, the many detailed steps involved in organizing the Member's activities actually frustrated the senior staffer and interfered with other responsibilities more important to the MP. As a result, project work was not up to expectations, while the scheduling side suffered from too little attention to detail. In this case, the junior staffer was never asked to look after the travel, meeting and appointment arrangements. The Member accepted the status quo, which was a lesser quality of assistance. A great opportunity to benefit from an employee's special skills was lost and the employee remained frustrated at not being able to use a proven skill. Result: a lose-lose situation.

What Is It Exactly We Agreed To?

It is to the advantage of both an MP and his/her staff that duties be well explained and understood. A written job description is the basic tool for this purpose. The aim is not to list exhaustively every aspect of the work required, but rather to circumscribe the main, non-negotiable elements of what has to be done by the incumbent, while leaving room for complementary duties or different methods of work. Of course, responsibilities specifically attached to a designated position cannot be optional. For example, office correspondence, whether by e-mail or paper, must be tracked and rigorously followed up. Yet, no matter how constraining a job where repetitive or routine tasks dominate, there are creative ways to make it more interesting, e.g., by allowing different work methods. The challenge in considering ways to enrich a position is to respect the boundaries of the main tasks and the spirit of the position description. In some unfortunate instances, MPs – as other managers – have been known to stretch the assigned duties more than marginally and beyond a reasonable interpretation of "related" tasks or responsibilities, only to land themselves into proverbial hot water.

The difference between related duties not spelled out in the job description, but nevertheless bearing a relation to the responsibilities assigned to an employee, and substantial changes in the assigned responsibilities can be borderline in some cases. The objective is to have a fair, mutually understood agreement. A job description should be a comfortable jacket, not a straitjacket, reasonably fitting the functions and the individual. This is a situation where a Member should not hesitate to consult colleagues or human-resources experts. Most often, the common test of reasonableness for a given set of duties is the salary paid to do them.

When the question of motivation is addressed, the first item of discussion is likely to be one of remuneration. In this regard, MPs have considerable latitude in setting the salaries of individual employees. The limits are essentially the position guidelines outlined in the *Manual Allowances and Services* and the maximum salary allowed for each of those categories. The MP has far more latitude than do managers in the public or private sectors. In the latter case, a panoply of administrative rules or collective agreement clauses leave the manager limited room to manoeuvre.

An MP not satisfied with how casework was being tracked in the Ottawa office, began to add further duties to a constituency office employee whose job was general reception and information at a very modest salary. Over a fairly lengthy period of time, the Member asked the riding employee to do more: Would she "mind following up on immigration cases?" Could she "help those constituents with income tax problems?" and then on to handling passport

requests and doing budget reports for the riding office. The employee did not object to doing these tasks per se; they added to the interest of her job and she found it satisfying. However, at the end of an especially busy and taxing week, the constituency employee took a hard look, not just at the heavier workload, but also at how the kind of work assigned to her had evolved. Even though she was gaining precious experience and enjoying the work, she was in fact carrying out substantially more important tasks that had less and less to do with the original job description, by now 14 months old. Her question to the Member was straightforward: "Is this situation really fair and does it still correspond to our initial agreement?"

Is There more to it Than the Money?

The consensus of human-resources experts in both business and the public service is that, once the salary rate and benefits are established at a level considered fair, money is far from the top motivator for employees. The mistake, however, is to take this conclusion to the other extreme. Let's face it: words of congratulations, expressions of confidence and thanks do count, but pay increases reinforce these gestures and present a tangible demonstration of appreciation for an employee's efforts and performance. Employees want to feel they are satisfactorily paid. Dissatisfaction with the paycheque most often stems from a real or perceived absence of relativity. Feelings of the type – "I am working way longer hours than Mary and my work is more important than hers. Why am I paid almost the same salary as she is?"– are regularly at the root of staff discontent.

An MP who was particularly satisfied with the quality of work and the efficiency of an hourly-paid part-time constituency worker, decided to give her a substantial increase. The Member ignored that he had given overall staff responsibility to a senior employee in the Hill office and directly instructed the pay office to process the increase. Other than the communication faux pas in not, at least, informing or explaining to the office manager why he wanted to grant this rather exceptional pay raise, the Member did not consider the effect on other staff. The raise was not overly generous in dollar terms and remained well within the financial envelope of the Member's Office Budget, but the percentage increase to the part-timer's pay rate happened to be twice the increase allowed full-time staff, who were putting in extra hours most of the time without remuneration. Although individual pay levels are technically confidential, the intensity of communication and exchange of formal and informal information in a small, closely integrated office make confidentiality difficult. The regular staff was understandably upset by this situation, and the MP then felt pressured to adjust their pay scales. The salary budget flexibility planned by the office manager disappeared. More seriously, rightly or wrongly, full-time staff did not forget the way the Member acted in the circumstances, with the predictable dampening effect on staff morale. The Member ultimately recognized the hard lesson learned in this case. The flexibility accorded him regarding pay levels was double-edged and needed to be deftly managed.

Some Members choose not to give individual salary adjustments and incentives and prefer to simply give everyone on staff a similar percentage raise across the board. From a management viewpoint, this represents a refusal to reward individual performance and to assume managerial responsibility. Especially to be resisted is rolling back pay levels because the Member's Office Budget is running short. In the first instance, the action confirms that the Member is not willing or able to judge employees' contributions. In the second instance, the MP is making staff pay for budgetary mismanagement that is not their fault.

A good mutual understanding of the job, fair working conditions and attention to pay levels are all basic ingredients to create a positive and productive atmosphere for staff. However, they will not suffice to maintain or stimulate energy and enthusiasm of employees. These ingredients need to be strengthened and complemented continuously. When was the last time you took deliberate action to motivate your team members? Do the quick mirror check in BOX B.

BOX B: What Makes A Good Motivator?
In The Last Year How Often Have You...

- Challenged an employee with an important and more complex task?
- Praised your team or an individual employee in a special way?
- Promoted an employee for special or exceptional performance and shared that employee's profile beyond the office?
- Helped your staff to complete a task by working with them, or assisted an individual by giving attentive direction to him or her when engaged in a special assignment?
- Delegated real decision power to your staff?
- Consulted the team on organizational issues and created the opportunity for staff in Ottawa and the constituency to review and evaluate how the office is operating?
- Written a congratulatory letter to one of your team members?
- Requested their views and recommendations on issues that concern you?
- Provided a substantial training opportunity?
- Taken the time to get to know a staffer better?

What Do You Mean: You Were Not Aware?

Motivating staff and trying as much as possible to treat employees equitably will go a long way in leading staff to put out personal effort and improve the performance of the team as a whole. The next major requirement in a well-run MP's office is establishing good communication. The sharing of relevant information is frequently assumed to happen naturally. Given the small number of personnel and the technological tools available (e-mail, fax, phones, frequent contact with the boss), how can there be communication problems? Yet, staff members have indicated many times that the pace of day-to-day activities, the respective and separate areas of responsibility of each employee, the demanding schedule of the MP and the different concerns of the constituency and Ottawa offices stand in the way of good communication. The communication function is the platform for building a team approach and reinforcing the support provided to the MP. For organizational effectiveness, communication requires conscious effort and consistency.

Management consultants most often hear complaints about too little information-sharing or the need to improve communication when examining staff issues in big or small organizations. It is not different in MPs offices.

Why? It seems that never enough relevant communication takes place even in so-called well managed shops. Building a dedicated and productive team is not possible without solid intra-office communication. Some communication improvement tips for MPs' offices appear in BOX C.

BOX C: Communicate A Lot, Then... Communicate Some More!

An MP's level of communication with staff is a sign of trust. Do you trust your staff? To prove it:

- Listen. Listen a lot. It is probably the best form of communication.
- Let staff know what is important to you in the short and long terms. Staff can then align with your direction and with your priorities.
- Information is power. Empower your staff.
- Give all the information you can…and then some. Staff members are astute at selecting what counts. Encourage (insist even!) employees to share information and ideas. This reinforces the message that each staff member is a key contributor to the effectiveness of the office.

BOX C: Communicate A Lot, Then... Communicate Some More! (Cont'd)

- Practise communicating on an on-going basis. Intermittent communications are a sign of crisis or uneven management. Practice will improve the quality of communication.
- Back up verbal communication with written texts on more significant issues. It underscores the importance and the crucial points of the message.
- If communication with staff really is important, show it. As much as possible, do it yourself rather than through an intermediary. The most convincing form of communication is example.

Do I Deserve All This?

Despite their best efforts and extensive experience, there is one law that parliamentarians can expect not to amend substantially: the law of averages. Somewhere and at some time, a Member will encounter problems of some kind with an employee, notwithstanding the lessons learned, the thoroughness of the work contract and excellent personnel management skills.

For this reason, the best way to address people problems is prevention and preparedness: learning and developing defensive human-resources managing skills. Compared to solving problems, avoiding problems is much underrated.

In hindsight, the Member involved in the situation that follows might have acted differently.

On meeting a candidate to offer him an administrative position in the constituency office, a Member cautiously proposes a reasonable starting salary. However, he adds that "this is just a starting salary" and that "it is for a steady job". He continues that there is "plenty of flexibility" and he would be surprised if "within a short while" the new employee does not qualify "for a better pay rate and even a promotion" based on the quality of his work. In the course of the employee's first three months this message is reiterated occasionally.

By acting in this manner the Member is for all intents and purposes making a formal commitment conditional on the performance of the employee. It would be quite understandable if the employee interpreted these remarks as firm commitments to increase her pay level or give him a promotion down the road. Members must be prudent not to make such offers unless they are very certain they can and are prepared to deliver. In this case, if the employee can demonstrate that his performance has not been criticized or if he has been told that the quality of his work is good, the remarks cited, although verbal only, could become a factor in a contract dispute.

In somewhat similar situations, MPs have been known to make promises to potential candidates relating to employment security in an effort to attract individuals who already hold secure employment. If an employee hired in such circumstances is terminated before the stated end date of a contract, the severance amounts could be significantly increased because of this type of commitment.

The tracking and allocation of annual leave and overtime is a sensitive issue as one Member learned when a staffer, who did not request any compensatory time off despite working many 10-hour days, discovered that a colleague was routinely being compensated with time off for extra hours worked. When this practice was questioned, an explanation was given that related to the colleague's years of experience, personal commitments and previous campaign work – all subjective reasons with no reasonable link to fair compensation for extra work. The reasons did not pass the test of equitable treatment.

Is "Because I Say So" Not Good Enough?

The large degree of discretion enjoyed by MPs in managing the operation of their offices gives them the opportunity to influence and shape how effective and helpful their staff can be. This management flexibility can, however, also represent an occupational hazard if discretionary and arbitrary latitude are confused. Indiscriminate use of managerial discretion can make you vulnerable.

The practice amounted to a form of favouritism that may have been involuntary or attributable to a lack of

attention as to how terms and conditions were applied in the office. Such incidents spur discontent that go beyond the case in question and inevitably undermine staff morale.

In the majority of situations, personnel management problems can be avoided. However, establishing a solid administrative and contractual platform does involve time, effort and paper or bureaucratic processes. And it is not an unconditional guarantee against people problems. However, good administrative housework does minimize the risk of costly misunderstandings or complications. MPs are much less likely to encounter staff management difficulties if the main elements of fair employment arrangements, obligations and rights on both the employer's and employee's parts are clearly understood, written down and lived by. Cases reported in the news media have shown all too clearly that personnel problems not correctly or professionally managed can cause an MP serious personal embarrassment.

You Think We Have A Problem?

Experience indicates that the more damaging problems that arise between MPs and their staff usually stem from the interpretation and application of legal or administrative rules set out in the employment framework applying to Members' staff: clauses of a contract are not clear or are too limiting; basic employee rights are not respected; the employee is not meeting expectations; an employee believes terms and conditions are not applied properly; workload and responsibilities are unfairly distributed or remunerated. Similar problems can be encountered when employees misunderstand or misinterpret clauses in a contract or their obligations as set out in the job description.

> *An energetic administrative assistant in a Member's office understood that his work schedule had been fixed so that he could start early and leave work earlier in order to pick up his son at school. Unexpectedly the party assigned the Member to a special task force, in effect upsetting the Member's own office hours. As a consequence, he required the assistant to stay later to review correspondence. The employee protested that he had accepted the job strictly on condition that the original work schedule was observed. The Member quickly responded it was an MP's prerogative to set hours of work, despite the short notice and his previous assurance to the contrary at the staffing interview. What had been heretofore a productive relationship began to escalate into a serious confrontation to neither party's advantage. Since the employee's contract made no mention of working hours, the Member insisted that the employee change his work schedule. Fortunately a close fellow MP, on hearing of the problem, suggested that his friend reconsider. An understanding satisfactory to both parties was reached through further intervention by the Member's colleague, and the positive working relationship was eventually restored. Had the fellow Member's intervention not occurred, both the employee and the Member would have lost.*

This difficult situation could have been entirely avoided or, at least, addressed differently had the terms and conditions of employment been set out in clear, unequivocal language. This experience strongly underscores, however, the advantage of leaving room for reasonable adjustments. Inserting a clause in the employment contract allowing for renegotiation or adjustment of conditions of work (such as the work schedule or specific tasks) is a simple approach, which leaves you some options as well as clearly informing the employee of these possibilities and your right to proceed with such modifications.

It seldom, if ever, will be a good idea to unilaterally impose changes or exercise your employer rights without consulting the person affected. Setting out the parameters should difficulties surface will be to your advantage and the employee cannot claim to be surprised. In the event your decision risks inconveniencing or displeasing an employee, anything you can do to attenuate the regrettable impact, such as providing advance notice, explaining the rationale of your decision, or letting the employee propose a mutually satisfactory solution, may lessen the problem or even lead to suitable arrangements. Unilateral changes imposed by an MP or a representative are impractical and harmful from the perspective of the effective operation of the office as a whole and the Member's interests in particular.

In a word, people problems can be largely pre-empted by doing basic homework when it comes to staff management. It must be understood that people problems are common in an MP's office where stress, level and scope of activity, personal commitment and responsive service are the order of the day.

Without pressing the panic button when a people problem does appear or is suspected, the fail-safe advice is: "do not be dismissive". These types of difficulties

seldom solve themselves, but prompt attention will stop them from being exacerbated. The predictable outcome of avoidance or delay is that the problem is compounded and becomes even messier.

A Member feels an employee in his riding office is performing substantially under expectations and decides the employee "has to go". The Member wants to avoid firing the middle-aged employee without cause, but has kept poor records relating to the employee's deficiencies. Other than making a comment on the need to verify outgoing correspondence more attentively or that filing does not seem up to date, the MP has not had a serious discussion about the employee's performance. The Member wants the employee to leave voluntarily. In an effort to achieve this goal, he assigns duties the employee does not like, makes more and more unfavourable remarks on her work and telephone manners in front of other staff or visitors. He also adds comments like "I am thinking about putting a younger, more energetic face in the constituency office."

Well, I Did Something About It, Didn't I?

Addressing a people problem unprofessionally is begging for trouble.

The scenario above encapsulates an approach frequently taken to deal with staff whose conduct or quality of work does not meet an MP's standards. Sometimes the cause may just be a plain conflict of personality. Rather than dealing with the problem itself, a roundabout way is sought to make the problem go away. What are the odds of a satisfactory denouement in this case? From a legal aspect, such tactics can amount to constructive dismissal, a form of harassment or discrimination. They certainly are not fair employment practices and, if termination eventually enters the picture, monetary costs would be increased significantly as compensation for what the employee was made to experience.

A Member decides "this is too much" after an employee's mistakes in organizing a meeting with an important advocacy group from his riding cause him embarrassment. Problems included an incomplete list of participants, inaccurate titles, confusion as to time and an inadequately prepared meeting room. The employee, who is clearly responsible, is known to be defensive, impatient and easily angered when the quality of his work is questioned. On returning to his office, the Member insists that two security guards accompany him to serve "as witnesses". He calls the employee into his office, along with the two guards, whom he instructs "to just sit down and listen". Assuming that the employee is entirely at fault, he then loudly describes what he terms "the total mess", sarcastically thanks the staffer "for the great help", and asks him to gather all his personal effects and leave for good, accompanied by the security staff.

Could I Have a Word With You?

Meetings with individual employees on a matter relating to performance or behaviour will often determine whether a situation can be corrected or solved. Such meetings demand all the skill and concentration the manager can muster. They are equally difficult for the employee who usually realizes that things are not right. Consider the tips in BOX D to make "one-on-ones" as productive and helpful as possible for both the Member and the individual employee. Based on those tips, how do you rate the Member's actions in the situation just described?

BOX D: A Checklist for Your 'One-on-One' Meeting...

- Prepare what you want to say to the employee ahead of time
- If you are angry, better to wait and cool down.
- Insist on the problem, not the person.
- Remember you may have it wrong.
- Keep your perspective. How serious is the problem?
- Avoid pettiness or vengeful measures. Take the high road.
- Ask the employee how she or he would solve the problem.
- Respect the individual at all times.
- Do not revert to direct or indirect threats.
- Document your interventions and meetings with the employee, especially the employee's commitment to "change".

How Do I Deal With All This?

In spite of significant differences in each and every case, there are general rules or proven approaches for managing people problems. Key steps in handling substandard performance or unacceptable behaviour are suggested in BOX E. However, the most important lesson learned from experience is that a Member has to acknowledge the problem and act on it. Do not be dismissive. Ask for help, or at the very least, for advice from a Human Resources staff-relations officer or, the House of Commons Legal Counsel, especially when you sense or wish to gauge potential legal implications.

BOX E: Oh Oh! What Do I Do Now?

When faced with a people problem, use the following questions as a quick checklist to help you move towards a solution:

- What is potentially the best way to approach the problem? Do I have the full picture? What is the best way to get it?
- Who could help me through this? A Human Resources staff-relations officer or Legal Counsel?
- How can I or someone else help the employee?
- What exactly is the problem? Discipline, behaviour, performance, illness?
- Has the employee had a chance to explain her or his point of view or difficulty?
- Does the employee understand my point of view, expectations, conditions and consequences relating to the situation?
- Is the employee willing to contribute to a solution?
- Will the measures I am considering lead to a solution?

Small or major differences with employees have the potential of undermining a Member's success in building a solid team and in motivating employees to peak performance. Common sense dictates that the efforts made in maintaining positive staff relations and in preventing, lessening or solving problems pay a high return.

So What's Really in it For Me?

Would any MP doubt that there is a marked positive correlation between the quality of staff work and his or her ability to deliver the goods as a representative, a parliamentarian and a party member? Likely not. Conversely, the quality and productivity of an MP's team depends on how seriously he or she invests in managing personal staff. People management in any employment environment today is a formidable challenge and no article can aspire to cover adequately the essential principles and practices of effective people management.

These few lines are meant to focus on key points and lessons drawn from actual experience that might help Members who are setting up their offices or who want to re-evaluate, re-adjust or improve personal staff management. Whether Members agree, totally, partly, or not at all with the suggested approaches is secondary. The objective is to encourage you to think about how best to handle your employees so they can support you in the effective discharge of your duties as a parliamentarian and constituency representative – and probably to lower your level of stress.

Stress and The MP

The job of an MP is unique. Beginning with the emotional high of winning a seat in an election, it offers a life that can be interesting and exhilarating. Since Parliament is the focus of national attention and the forum for debating issues of national and international importance, it opens the door to a life of wide horizons. For those who like verbal battle, the daily Question Period can be satisfying and very stimulating. In sum, election to the House of Commons holds the prospect of a challenging new career combined with an exciting lifestyle change.

Most newly elected MPs soon discover, however, that their new life also brings a whole series of unanticipated pressures. The time demands of the job have increased with the growth of government during the past few decades and they are now extreme and unremitting. The arrival of jet aircraft in the 1970s made it possible for all MPs, even those representing remote parts of the country, to return to their constituencies for the weekend and their voters now expect them to do so. Those representing areas closer to the national capital even find themselves pressed to return to their constituencies for important events during the week, after which they frequently hurry back to Ottawa. The decision taken by the House around 1980 to fund offices in each Member's constituency also added significantly to time demands on MPs. This important decision reflected the enormous expansion since the Second World War in social services provided by government. With this growth has inevitably come delays or errors in the delivery of services and the growth of public expectations, all situations that have fuelled a flood of inquiries directed at the constituency offices. Polls show that 50 per cent of the time when citizens find themselves in difficulty with some government program, they turn to one of their elected representatives – federal or provincial – for advice and help. For some Members, work for their constituents has become a principal source of satisfaction and self-worth and the activity that validates their job. For almost all Members this demand on their time is virtually endless, occupying them when they are in Ottawa as well as in their constituencies.

When the House is in session, Members representing constituencies in the East start calling early in the morning, and those from the West have to be in their offices in the evening to deal with issues raised by their electors. When the House is not in session, MPs are usually in their local offices or travelling within their constituencies. As a result, there is no letup.

The time demands of the job have increased with the growth of government during the past few decades and they are now extreme and unremitting.

Family life suffers particular stress, confirmed by the exceptionally high divorce rates among MPs. Members, particularly those representing rural ridings or those with small towns, find that they are constantly in the public eye, so much so that to have private time it may be necessary to leave the country. Spouses, partners and children of Members may even become the butt of local anger over actions taken or not taken by their party.

It is also a life without security; every four years or so their jobs vanish and success in the next election normally depends more on the public image of their party leader than on their own performance. Nor does the position bring the respect that it once did: what used to be regarded as an honourable position is now ranked in public opinion polls just ahead of used-car salesmen.

It comes as a disturbing surprise to many newly elected MPs that their powers are substantially circumscribed. When they decide to seek office, many assume that, if successful, they would be in a position to participate centrally in debating and forming national policy. Instead, they discover that most policy is formulated by public servants who work closely with Ministers, and

that power is actually wielded by the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

The transition to life as a member of Parliament presents its own challenge because parliamentary politics is a hard job for which to prepare. There is nothing else quite like it. Lawyers with court experience have some advantage, in that they are accustomed to verbal confrontation. Those who have worked previously for a Member have been exposed indirectly to the lifestyle and are accordingly better prepared to face the constraints of the job.

Political life is also highly competitive, with rivalry often most intense within one's party. Some Members are troubled to find themselves competing primarily with their party colleagues.

Most new MPs identify these demands and pressures as being more extreme than they had anticipated when they decided to run, and a source of some aggravation and stress. Many Members also point to the additional emotional pressures that add to the physical toll that the life entails.

Although the situation for MPs in government and in opposition differs significantly, both experience their share of frustrations. Politics is a team sport and for some government Members particularly, the pressure to conform to the party line can be a strain. They are called upon to attend House and committee meetings faithfully and to fulfil other tasks determined largely by the priorities of the party leadership. There are limited opportunities to speak in the House and Members may be actively discouraged from speaking their mind if it differs with the position taken by the government. On other occasions, they may be asked to speak on bills that have little interest for them; and the text of their interventions may sometimes even be handed to them by party staff. In principle, caucus is the forum where government Members can vent their feelings, but the time available for expressing opinions in national caucus, which the Prime Minister attends, is extremely limited.

Although opposition MPs generally have more freedom to speak, a Member can get into trouble if his or her statements are perceived to affect adversely the party's public image. Those who ran for office expecting to contribute to policy development may find that the pressure to be critical and negative makes them uncomfortable. For Members who campaigned with the larger objective of reforming the parliamentary system, its imperviousness to change is an aggravating reminder of the limitations of their power.

For government and opposition MPs alike who looked forward to sharing in policy-making, the limited opportunities to achieve modifications in draft legislation once it finally gets to the House or to modify expenditures proposed in the spending estimates can be a source of frustration. More generally, the disconnection between the standing often accorded to Members in their constituencies and their limited power in Parliament can be a persistent source of discomfort.

Members, no matter which party they belong to, face special strains if they want to vote contrary to the position taken by their party. Their colleagues will remind them that they are letting down their side; their party leadership will warn them of the personal consequences of such a decision. The very system for holding recorded votes in the House is designed to maximize the pressure on Members to line up with their colleagues.

All Members, even Ministers, are aware that their future in Parliament lies with the leader of their party. Electing leaders at party conventions combined with the commanding profile provided by television places party leaders in dominant positions that are not easily assailed. All MPs realize that if they act in a way that their leader does not approve, they not only jeopardize their future advancement, but also risk their current position on a committee or the prospect of travelling abroad with a delegation in the future.

These pressures, physical and emotional, that characterize the life of an MP can, especially when combined, cause severe stress. The hectic pace of the MP's life leaves little down time to recharge personal batteries.

Stress is a Fact of Life

What is stress? How serious is it? How can it be detected? What effect does it have? The World Health Organization has concluded that workplace stress has become a "worldwide epidemic". Among a wide range of professions, studies have concluded that politicians are particularly exposed to stress. How individual Members react to the pressures of their unique and demanding job is partly a function of their temperament and genes. Lessons learned from dealing

with stress can also be helpful. In the main, MPs who have succeeded in some earlier career not only have the advantage of experience in coping with life's stresses, but also may not feel the same need to prove themselves.

Among a wide range of professions, studies have concluded that politicians are particularly exposed to stress.

The late Dr. Hans Selye of McGill University, a founder of the study of stress, recognized that individuals need stress to reach the highest levels of their capacities. But he also concluded that too much stress, without relief in the form of down time, is harmful. At the very minimum, it can impair the quality of a person's performance by causing him or her to become irritable and quicker to take offence, which can in turn lead them to be unnecessarily combative. More seriously it can damage personal relationships, lead some to seek solace in alcohol or drugs, and can even affect overall health in a variety of ways.

Dr. Mark Walter, a physician who served from 1990 to 1994 at the National Defence hospital as the resident doctor responsible for MPs and senior public servants, had a unique opportunity to observe the medical impact of stress on MPs. In his book, *Personal Resilience*, he warned that emotional stress can undermine the "immune system", which may account for the number of Members who get colds as a session extends. It can even contribute directly, he wrote, "to physical blockage of arteries". He continued:

> *"Aside from the two big killers, cardiovascular disease and cancer, stress factors also play a major role in many other types of disease, anything from skin conditions such as psoriasis to common digestive disorders such as hyperacidity, peptic ulcer disease and irritable bowel syndrome".*

Stress is a cumulative phenomenon that occurs when demands consistently outstrip a person's capacity to adjust to them. However, the fact that this occurs is not something to be ashamed of. Dr. Richard Rahe of the Nevada Stress Center has identified 43 common life events which in varying degrees generate stress, ranging from major causes such as the death of a spouse or partner or divorce, through illness, being fired, trouble with in-laws, to such otherwise pleasurable challenges as preparing for vacations or Christmas.

A British inquiry into mortality, known as the Whitehall Study, concluded that the amount of work and the responsibilities that people carry are not the main causes of stress. Indeed, the author observed that people at higher levels in hierarchies, who as a consequence work longer hours and have more responsibility, but who are also in a position to take decisions regarding their work, tend to live longer. Statistics Canada undertook a comparable inquiry that reached a similar conclusion, namely that it is not hard work that causes stress. Rather, people experience stress when they lack power to decide how, when or with whom they work, or when they feel that their work has little value.

MPs will recognize that their situation is comparable, in that the many constraints on their ability to control their environment can be a source of irritation, frustration and stress. The particular problem facing members of Parliament is the unrelenting persistence of challenges and frustrations and the lack of down time to recuperate.

Dr. Walter's close professional contact with MPs led him to the conclusion that "politicians have one of the most stressful jobs imaginable". He further observed that if assistance were given to Members to cope with stress, the health of MPs would be improved and the collective performance of Parliament should also be enhanced.

The particular problem facing members of Parliament is the unrelenting persistence of challenges and frustrations and the lack of down time to recuperate.

In that spirit, this issue of *Parliamentary Government* offers MPs a number of suggestions that could help them to manage stress. Some are addressed to Members and others to the institution of Parliament. The list is based partly on the work of physicians, including Dr. Walter, who have specialized in this field. It has been cross-checked and supplemented through conversations with medical doctors who are or have been MPs themselves, and who have observed the parliamentary environment and counselled colleagues

suffering from acute stress. Finally it has benefited from conversations with present and former Members, some of whom have themselves experienced severe stress while in office.

Advice to MPs from Knowledgeable People

Exposure to stress is a fact of life for a Member. Bear in mind that the impact of stress is cumulative, so that the effect of the job has a tendency to sneak up on you unexpectedly. Accordingly, within the constraints of your work, try to organize your life to reduce the accumulation of pressure and to find ways to give yourself some relief.

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Just as the effect of stress is cumulative, so the ways to manage it are several and varied. Each of the following suggestions will do some good, but alone they are not adequate to give you substantial relief if you are experiencing stress. The more suggestions that you can incorporate into your life, the greater the relief they will provide. Naturally, since genes differ, your physical and emotional vulnerability will vary from that of your colleagues. Besides, Members who have already faced stress in a previous profession will probably have developed some habits for managing it.

In the light of the above observations, the following suggestions are offered:

Your Physical Well Being

Get exercise on a regular basis. Your lifestyle as a Member is essentially sedentary: sitting at lengthy meetings or at your desk, moving about the Hill by shuttle bus; spending hours in aircraft breathing stale air. Doctors consider that exercise is not only good for the body, but it also helps greatly to relieve stress. The two most obvious ways to get some exercise on the Hill, already practised by a number of Members, are walking to and from your office, and working out regularly in a gym. While these activities take time, those who exercise find that they are more productive at work and that makes up for the time lost. Those who work out in the gym may also form friendships with Members of other parties, something that the setup of the House lobbies and the seating arrangements in committees does not encourage.

Get exercise on a regular basis.

Eat as regularly as possible, choose healthy food and cut back on the coffee. Following this advice may be even harder than exercising regularly. Breakfast meetings are now a common practice; lunch may be picked up on the run, often consisting of fast food that is cholesterol-inducing and calorie-rich; and dinner may either be another sandwich at a meeting or picked up late in the evening. As a result, many MPs put on weight, as well as clogging their arteries, possibly increasing the risk of a heart attack.

Select healthy food at meetings, preferably fresh fruit and vegetables. On days when you are not attending a meeting over breakfast, eat well. If you are not at a dinner meeting, take the time to eat a regular meal. And try to avoid eating late in the evening, since late evening meals can affect your sleep, an unhealthy situation for a profession where you are often short of sleep.

Eat as regularly as possible, choose healthy food and cut back on the coffee

The easy availability of coffee at committee meetings and in the lounges behind the House chamber represents an undesirable temptation. Maybe you drink coffee to help you to stay awake if you are short of sleep. However, it is a stimulant, hardly necessary in a job that already generates substantial adrenalin. So, resist it. Juice also can add to the calories you ingest. Press instead for bottled water.

The Importance of Family and Friends

Make time for your family and friends. The demands of the job make this extremely difficult. If you are married, your election is likely to have a more profound effect on your spouse or partner than it has on you. You gain a stimulating and absorbing new job; your spouse or partner suffers a loss without a compensating gain.

If you retain your residence in the constituency, much of your weekends will be taken up with meeting constituents or attending functions so that you have little time at home. It is hardly surprising that many spouses and partners begin to feel neglected, with the result that the rate of divorce on the Hill is substantially above the national average. This phenomenon is not unique to the federal Parliament. Provincial politicians suffer in similar ways.

If you are married, your election is like to have a more profound effect on your spouse than it has on you. You gain a stimulating and absorbing new job; your spouse suffers a loss without a compensating gain.

Children, especially younger children, can lose touch with you. One former Member decided not to run again when he faced the fact that he had never been home for the birthdays of any of his three children, the eldest of whom was 12. Another parliamentarian decided to move his family to the capital when his five-year-old daughter asked him: "When are you coming home to visit?"

There is no simple solution to this problem. Whatever you decide, remember that your family is seriously affected when you are elected to the House of Commons, and the possible consequences need to be kept in mind. Your spouse or your partner and your family are your most important support system, the persons to whom you can turn when you have important personal decisions to take. Not only can the loss of that support seriously affect your performance, it can in itself become a major cause of stress. The intensity of your life as an MP may mask some of the immediate cost of a separation, but you may pay later when you cease to be a Member and try to build a new life.

Single Members face analogous problems. The support system for single persons is their network of close friends and extended family. Once elected, it can be very difficult to maintain contact and the support these relationships provide is lost, which can generate a troubling sense of isolation. Building new close relationships with your colleagues, normally in your own party, can help. But that takes time and effort and some may find it stifling.

Married or single, life in the capital can be lonely. You lose touch with your personal networks at home, and the demands of life on the Hill make it extremely difficult to develop any kind of personal network in Ottawa. Difficult as it is, make an effort to build relationships off the Hill. Try to do something not connected with Parliament.

Take time to review with your family where to live. After your election, begin to discuss with your family whether to remain in the constituency or move to Ottawa. This is a decision that you should not take immediately. Some Members have found that it helped to move their family to Ottawa, because they could be home most evenings. But this is not a solution for many Members: your children may be at important stages in their schooling; your spouse or partner may have a job; or there may be cultural or linguistic difficulties involved in a move.

A common perception is that your constituents will resent a decision to move to Ottawa, thereby prejudicing your chances for re-election. Yet several MPs, who decided a few years after their election to move to Ottawa to be reunited with their families, were pleased to discover that their constituents appreciated the argument that it was done to preserve the family. They also found that they could devote more time during constituency visits to meeting their electors. One MP who had moved to Ottawa, observed that he can now devote more time to his constituents and that they often remark: "We are glad you have not forgotten us." Of the several reasons for not moving, the argument that your electors will hold it against you appears to have the least validity.

Take time to review with your family where to live.

Apart from the all-important family considerations, much depends on how far your constituency is from Ottawa. If distances are not great, the argument for a move is much weaker. And should a decision be taken in a future Parliament to modify the order of business on Fridays, that too would strengthen the argument for not moving.

The farther a constituency is geographically from the capital, the less expectation there is for in-riding appearances and the greater acceptance there is of relocation to Ottawa. This is ironic when travel by car to closer constituencies often takes a longer time and is more stressful.

Organizing Your Life as an MP

Learn how to say No. Saying "no" to a request from a senior Member of your party, a colleague or even a constituent is not easy in politics, where favours traded are the currency of the profession. So a decision to decline a request for some service can sometimes have implications for your future. However, of all the advice offered in preparing this article, this received the most consistent emphasis. It was identified as being crucial to maintaining your personal support system – family and close friends – and to gaining important down time.

Set realistic personal goals. Parliament operates according to rules of procedure and precedents developed over many years that govern the way that change is accomplished. Because the political process is highly adversarial and promotes confrontation, one party's proposals for change are inevitably viewed with suspicion by other parties. The result is that modifications of the system occur gradually. At another level, the distribution of power and the way the rules of procedure are applied make it difficult even to amend bills.

This does not mean you should give up efforts to change the system or to amend legislation. But remember that Parliament is a place where change is usually accomplished in small steps. Accordingly, if you have come to Parliament with substantial goals, it helps if you can identify shorter-term intermediate objectives. If you set a series of modest goals, your chances of success are greater and you could even have the satisfaction of exceeding them.

This is important because a major cause of stress identified by many persons consulted in preparing this article is the tendency of some newly elected MPs to set goals that are overly ambitious. Failure to achieve such goals is likely to cause discouragement and intense frustration.

Critical to setting realistic goals is knowing thoroughly how the system works and therefore what can be changed, how much it takes to achieve the desired changes and over what time-frame. Just acquiring this knowledge takes time, which is a good reason for waiting a while before you formulate your personal objectives.

Reflect on how you intend to measure success in achieving your objectives. In Parliament, there is a natural tendency for Members to measure success by the press coverage that their actions or statements generate. For opposition Members in particular, media criticism of the government can be highly valued.

But if you have a specific personal goal, media attention achieved through taking a strong position may make it more difficult to gain allies, which is normally a critical step in achieving a goal. The news media thrive on focusing attention on situations that involve conflict or disappointments. To dramatize stories, reporters – often goaded by their editors – will look for angles that reveal tension or conflicting objectives. It is no surprise that genuine successes achieved on the Hill gain much less media coverage than situations involving conflict.

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If you decide that the true measure of success for you is the realization of a personal objective, then media attention is likely to be an instrument to be used cautiously. In such cases, should you succeed, your reward may be the ability to say to yourself, "I have made a difference."

Try to keep an opening. Unless you are close to retirement, you should seek, if you can, to keep open a path to a job in case you are defeated or decide not to run again. This may seem like strange advice, especially if you have just won your seat. But politics is an unpredictable profession, and unanticipated events can suddenly change the prospects for you and your party.

Especially as the next election approaches, you may find yourself worrying about what you will do if you fail to be re-elected. This is a legitimate concern because the election turnover in Canada is one of the highest in the world. If you have a profession that you can return to or have made arrangements with your former employer

to take you back, this knowledge can protect you from additional stress. Furthermore, it will strengthen your hand if you find yourself in a position where you feel it necessary to break with your party on an important policy question.

If the worst happens and you are defeated, knowing that you have a place to return to can be an enormous comfort. One of the unfortunate consequences of the diminished regard that the public has for politicians is that a defeated Member may find it difficult to get a job. A poll taken a year after the 1993 election, when more than 200 MPs were either defeated or did not seek re-election, revealed that a disturbingly large number faced difficulty when trying to find a job. Specifically they indicated that their experience as an MP was frequently treated in interviews as a liability, not an asset. Finding oneself in this position can be especially troubling for former Members who have family responsibilities and have not qualified for an MP's pension.

The stress is aggravated because defeat after working hard in an election can be traumatic, a condition aggravated by the requirement that a defeated and usually exhausted Member must close his or her office within 30 days. A further source of stress and even anger can occur when a defeated Member finds that people whom he or she thought were personal friends suddenly drop the relationship and seek to make contact with the successor MP. Former Members who have suffered this experience state that this can be one of the most personally troubling consequences of defeat. As one of them said, "It comes as a shock to find that the telephone stops ringing." Another warned: "Don't expect to be thanked for all the hard work you put in."

If this should happen to you, it will help enormously if you can say that during your time as an MP you have been able to help some people. This makes the job rewarding and defeat more palatable.

When and Where Should you Look for Help

Paying attention to these several suggestions may assist you to manage the unusual pressures of your job as an MP. If you are lucky, you may be one of those fortunate MPs who have little trouble coping with the stress. If, however, you sense that you are beginning to suffer from stress, you may wonder how to recognize when you have reached the point to look for help. Although people react in many different ways, symptoms include difficulty in concentrating, inability to sleep, working longer hours and avoiding social contact, feelings of depression, acute irritability and/or heightened anxiety.

While the consequences of stress may be no more than the absence of a sense of well-being and reduced effectiveness, the condition in the extreme can be life threatening. Persons suffering from severe depression have committed suicide. Stress may also aggravate a latent heart condition. So if you sense that you are overly stressed, do not hesitate to seek help from your doctor.

At the same time, speak to colleagues, usually in your own party, with whom you can talk candidly. Discuss the situation with your party whip. Your doctor may advise you to take a period of rest or a holiday.

Should the House do More?

The House, through the Board of Internal Economy, has in fact taken some steps to improve the situation. Apart from upgrading the gym, there is a clinic for monitoring blood pressure, and the calorie-count of food provided in the lobbies adjacent to the House chamber during the lunch hour has been somewhat reduced. Members who are travelling abroad on delegations are permitted to use travel points to bring their spouse or partner, providing an important opportunity for busy MPs to be with their loved ones. However, other services have been cut back.

The Board of Internal Economy is aware of the problem, but is cautious about providing certain kinds of support for fear that the public and especially the media will slant their reports on the services made available and suggest that MPs are receiving costly privileges not accessible to other Canadians. This concern is well founded. For example, some articles on the parliamentary gym focused on its upgraded equipment without ever mentioning the value of that facility in helping MPs to cope with stress. Indeed, fear of criticism seems to have been a reason for terminating the service provided by Dr. Mark Walter. Although Parliament has the support of two nurses, they lack the medical training needed to assist Members suffering from stress or other serious medical problems.

In a book entitled *Managing Stress*, Mark Greener asserted that half of absences from work are due to stress-related causes. Many employers have recognized this fact and have acted accordingly. The Conference

Board of Canada reported in a study that half of workers surveyed experience high stress levels, nearly double the amount reported only a decade ago. Faced with this situation, 52 per cent of medium and large businesses surveyed by the Conference Board now have wellness programs. This represents a growth over a five-year period of 60 per cent in the number of companies with such programs.

Since a majority of larger companies now provide wellness programs for their workers, Parliament should do something similar. The problem is genuine and the effect of stress on the work of Members and of the House itself is demonstrable. The House should act, even if the action generates some adverse media comment. It comes with the territory. Politicians have always been and always will be the object and butt of media comment. Over a century ago, at a time when the British House of Commons was witness to the epic debates of Disraeli and Gladstone, Bernard Shaw wrote about the profession: "He knows nothing and thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career."

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Additional support from Parliament to help MPs cope with stress would be helpful. Of that there can be no doubt. But in the final analysis, stress is a personal problem faced in greater or lesser degree by all Members of Parliament. MPs who confront and overcome the challenge will find that the quality and effectiveness of their work will improve. The ultimate result will be a more productive Parliament.

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