



Interview

A New Ball Game?

Interview with Members of the Alberta Legislative Assembly

Since the mid-1930s the Alberta Legislature has been dominated by a single party: Social Credit from 1935 to 1971, then the Progressive Conservatives from 1971 to the present. Prior to 1986 only once did the opposition have more than twenty seats. The last time the Liberal Party elected a member was in 1967. The New Democrats had never elected more than two. In 1986 the electorate returned sixty one Conservatives, sixteen New Democrats, four Liberals and two members of the Representative Party. Has the composition of the new House changed the way the legislature operates? One member from each party was asked what, if any, changes have taken place in the Assembly.

Greg Stevens (Conservative) has represented Banff-Cochrane since 1979. Pam Barrett (New Democrat) is the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands. Bettie Hewes (Liberal) represents Edmonton Goldbar. Ray Speaker is the member for Little Bow and Leader of the Representative Party of Alberta. The interviews were done in May 1987 by John McDonough, Director, Legislative Research Service of the Legislative Library and Gary Levy.

What prompted you to get into politics in the first place.

Greg Stevens: As manager of the Banff townsite during the 1970s I became involved in negotiations with federal officials over the issue

of autonomy for the townsite. It was my first real experience with the political process. As a matter of fact, I first met Premier Peter Lougheed around this time. His family leased a residence in the townsite and one day I got a call informing me the Premier would be over to pay his rent. I met him again when I became Vice President of the Alberta Housing Corporation. In 1975 the Corporation built virtually the entire town of Fort McMurray, some 2600 housing units. I then moved back to Calgary where I was involved in the planning and construction of senior citizen housing projects.

The sitting member was retiring. I went over to talk to David King, a former minister and a friend of the family. He spent about an hour going over all the reasons not to run - stress, money, lack of privacy. Then I asked him why he was in public life. He went on for three hours about the positive benefits. I decided to seek the nomination and was elected in 1979.

Bettie Hewes: After many years with the Edmonton Social Planning Council and having sat on numerous boards and commissions, I was elected to the Edmonton Municipal Council in 1974 and served for ten years. In 1984 I received a call from the Minister of Transport, Lloyd Axworthy, who was looking for someone to serve as Chairman of Canadian National. He wanted a person not representative of Bay Street, a westerner, a woman and someone who could run a board. I

filled all those qualifications and was appointed. Following the change of government in Ottawa in 1985 my position was not renewed. Some people think that was what motivated me to run for political office but not so. I was simply becoming dismayed with what was happening in Alberta and felt compelled to run.

Ray Speaker: My father was actively involved in the Social Credit Party. I used to help him by driving people to the polls and so on. From 1959 to 1962 I attended the University of Alberta and became Leader of Social Credit on campus. (Joe Clark, Grant Notley and Jim Coutts were active in other parties at that time.) I got to know Premier Ernest Manning and after graduation worked for him to revitalize constituency associations in the south of the province in preparation for the upcoming 1963 election. When Speaker Peter Dawson passed away I decided to seek the nomination in Little Bow.

Pam Barrett: I first got involved in politics when I was twelve years old and I learned at school about Tommy Douglas and the Medicare issue. I was convinced that equal access to services, regardless of ability to pay, should be provided to secure the social services safety net. I have been involved in politics and the New Democratic movement ever since. I had been a researcher for the New Democrats when we were the Official Opposition and developed a very keen interest in issues within provincial jurisdiction. It was Grant

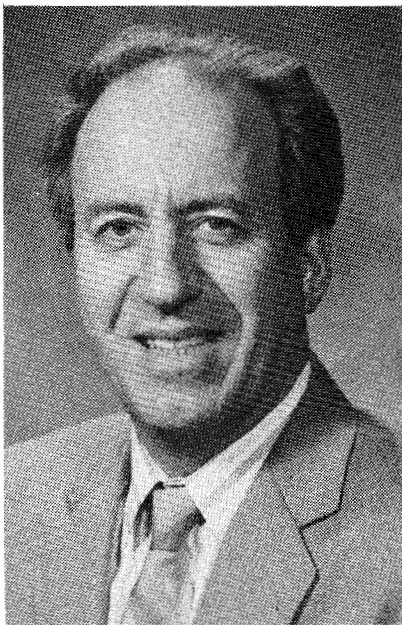
Notley who asked me to be a candidate. I felt this was an excellent endorsement and I carried my commitment to seek elective office after his death.

How did the role of MLA correspond to what you expected?

Bettie Hewes: It was certainly different to city council where every person acts for him or herself. The existence of government and opposition teams is very different from what you find at City Hall.

Another difference arises from the fact that individuals tend to run on the basis of what they would do as a government. Less thought is given to a role in opposition. You have to debate with the government knowing that you are not going to win. When you are championing a cause in which you believe you have to decide between scoring political points or working with the government to try to resolve issues.

Greg Stevens: My experience was atypical in that I went directly into the cabinet. When the House started, the opposition went right after the new ministers. The Premier had made some trips to Hawaii and as the minister responsible for government personnel, they questioned me about issues relating to government travel and conflict of interest. I received some advice from the Clerk's office, from colleagues and from the Premier's office but in



Greg Stevens

the House, you are really on your own.

Even some simple things are not apparent to the neophyte. One day a colleague sent me a note suggesting I introduce a grade nine class from my riding who were in the gallery. I did not know how to do that, so he wrote it out for me. While I was speaking, another rather mischievous colleague sent a note over saying, "you are doing great but your fly is open". There is no formal school for MLA's but gradually you learn the ropes.

Ray Speaker: The first role of a representative is to get to know his or her constituents, their problems and their personal pursuits. Constituents often have good ideas and it is important that we not prejudge them. We need to support their individual initiatives and not thwart their personal pursuits. Of course, my constituents give me the right to pursue my own objectives in terms of new legislation. That can be a frightening responsibility. You can ruin democracy if there is too much confidence in the Leader.

Pam Barrett: Having been a researcher, I was aware of all the facets of the job of an MLA. I had to provide information that would serve those functions; the researchers often acted as surrogate MLA's, doing case work and attending functions. The difference between my job as a researcher for this office and as an MLA is strictly one of time. As a researcher, I would probably spend only two evenings a week in what might be described as overtime and one extra day every other weekend. As an MLA, I put in time every evening, with the possible exception of Friday, and sometime every weekend. I use Friday evening for a marathon sleep to recharge my batteries.

A larger opposition must have changed the tenor of question period?

Greg Stevens: Yes. Twenty two members is certainly different from two. We have a format whereby the first two questions go to the Leader of the Official Opposition who is also allowed three supplementaries. A government member may also get a supplementary. Next the Leader of the third party gets a question followed by three supplementaries and again the other parties are allowed a supplementary.

This means that for nearly thirty minutes we deal essentially with three issues. Sometimes it is boring and certainly it can be frustrating to

individual private members wanting to ask a question on a different issue. Government members are criticized for "tennis lobs" but I often have tough questions I want to put to the ministers but I cannot get the floor.

Bettie Hewes: I do not like the format although it was negotiated and agreed upon by all the parties at the start of the session. By the time we get our turn there may have already been ten or twelve questions, counting supplementaries. Three supplementaries are time consuming.

I find cabinet ministers tend to read long answers. Sometimes the Speaker cuts them off. This could be done more often I think.

Question Period is very seductive. It is the only part of the proceedings covered by the media. We must learn to craft our questions. They tend to be too academic in their search for information and therefore they may not have the strongest political effect.

Ray Speaker: I think the new format is good and fair. I give credit to the government and the official opposition for accepting it. It provides the opportunity for backbenchers to ask questions and the potential for adversarial dialogue. However the Speaker keeps us close to the rules. As we near an election, issues become more focused and we may see more of a go for the throat approach.

Pam Barrett: Government ministers do not like scrutiny. They manipulate Question Period by taking six or seven minutes to respond to a question that may have taken one minute to deliver. This is an abuse by the government of the spirit of the Standing Orders of this Assembly; it reflects very poorly on them.

I also object to the number of government backbenchers who are recognized for questions. Many days, government members get more questions after the designated leaders' questions than do the opposition members. Government members through their caucus have exclusive access to the reasoning behind government decisions, this is where their questions should be put. They should not abuse the valuable time of Question Period which should be overwhelmingly given to opposition questions.

I believe that we are a rare legislature in that we permit supplementary questions to a main question from members of all caucuses. Although this was a

reasonable procedure for a very small opposition, with a larger opposition it is a waste of time. It interferes with the ability of any caucus to introduce new subjects for scrutiny. I believe we should limit supplementary questions. I would propose a plan where the originator questioner gets two supplementaries to the main question and that is it. If anyone else wants to get on that subject they have to do it in the order that they are recognized with an entitlement to two supplementary questions of their own. It has been to the government's advantage to have their members stand up to pose sweetheart supplementaries to the hard questions posed by the opposition.

How important is the size of an opposition in determining whether it is effective?

Greg Stevens: I don't think numbers matter that much. It is quality that counts. I think there is a real problem in the way that the opposition assigns specific members to shadow particular cabinet portfolios. I wonder how their constituents feel, when their MLA only speaks on certain issues he or she has been assigned to shadow whereas the constituent may be interested in a far broader range of issues. Would that constituent feel well represented?

Between 1967 and 1971 when you had an Official Opposition grow from six to ten MLA's, they were seen as standing together to represent Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Now with the three opposition parties the public sees that each is trying to secure its own moment in the sun. This split among the opposition parties is to the advantage of the government.

Numbers also matter in the sense that we on the government side have to be much more careful. There are now only thirty-four private members to ensure that there will be a quorum of twenty in the House at all times.

Bettie Hewes: Our caucus has divided up the requirements, leaving each individual member with a huge plateful.

In terms of our responsibilities outside of the House, each member has an active constituency life. This is made difficult by the fact that during session, each of the four MLA's is tied down to the House. It is difficult to get away from Edmonton to find out what is going on throughout the rest of the province and it is almost impossible

to cover all of the issues that one would like. The MLA is spread very thin and has to do the difficult balancing act of deciding between what you must do and what you should do.

Numbers count in terms of the visibility, viability and health of the opposition. With twenty-two members, the opposition looks better; it's more obvious to the public that there is a vital opposition that can be a realistic alternative to the government. Some have remarked that the heckling during Question Period and the more aggressive parry and thrust of debate across the floor is affecting the decorum of the House. They say it is deteriorating to the level of the Federal Parliament. The Liberal Leader has a very ready wit, and a very humorous turn of phrase. This may be unsettling to some. However, these are important basic human exchanges. To stifle this flow of communication, to try to extract the emotions from the House, would not be positive. The debate would become constipated. Part of the opposition's role is to get the government ministers standing on one foot. It is easier to knock them down that way and we may discover something very useful as a result.

Ray Speaker: Yes numbers matter. The more people you have, the more issues you can raise and investigate. If there are only four or five people, you need to become an authority on so many things and it is so difficult to have all the pertinent facts at your finger tips. With more members there is a greater opportunity to study and develop issues. The result is greater accountability.

In the past, when the opposition was small, and while I was the Leader of the Official Opposition, the various opposition groups would have informal discussions over strategy. This was particularly evident during the all night debate in 1981 over the Heritage Savings Trust Fund. Here Grant Notley (NDP Leader), Tom Sidlinger (Independent, previously a member of the P.C. caucus) and I openly worked together. I would be reluctant to do that now. I am not a socialist, I want to see a small "c" conservative government returned to this province. Any support that I would give to the ND's would simply strengthen a left wing alternative. In fact, the ND's now have the numbers and they feel that they are large enough to carry the ball by themselves.

The timing is also important. If Peter Lougheed had led the



Bettie Hewes

Conservative party in 1950, he would never have gotten anywhere. But he appeared on the scene at a period of political, social and economic transition in Alberta. The new generation of people didn't remember the roots of the Social Credit Party. They were looking for something more exciting. It was a period of violent social upheaval. People no longer looked to a leader who embodied a strong religious tradition, who was stable and conservative. There was a minor recession in early 1970. The Provincial government reacted by tightening the purse strings; although this may have been correct fiscally, it was not popular. Lougheed thus had three very powerful factors operating in his favour.

Today we are in a new period of social and economic change. However, it is the economic change that is so violent. This is obvious when one examines the oil and gas industries, agriculture, small business, individual jobs. Alberta is again in a period of transition. There is political instability and political opportunity. The voter is looking for someone to help him out of this mess.

Pam Barrett: Numbers matter just in terms of having a presence. The political will to have that presence felt does not rely on massive numbers. We had a two-man Official Opposition from 1982 to 1986; the effect of that was to return a sixteen-member Official Opposition after the 1986 election. Two members were able to have a substantial effect on

what went on in the House, so, in my opinion, quality certainly takes precedence over quantity.

This two member opposition had to anticipate every possible manoeuvre under recognized parliamentary procedure that could hold up any bill or motion. We spent hours preparing hoists, amendments, reasoned amendments, debates on the actual motion itself, fleshing out every possible detail to use to advantage, the maximum amount of parliamentary time. We had to know procedure inside-out in order to effect this type of strategy, but it worked. We also had to anticipate every Speaker's ruling and to live with some rather strict limitations



Pam Barrett

decided by the Speaker.

The difference between the present legislature and the previous one is that we are now more able to make our presence felt outside of Question Period. We can spend time and effort on the rest of the Orders of the Day. We develop successive arguments to be used on a sustained basis in a way that was virtually impossible for two people because of limitations on the number of occasions in which a member could speak

Are there any distinctive features about the way your caucus is organized?

Greg Stevens: The major difference between the Lougheed caucus and that of Don Getty is that Premier Getty chairs almost the entire meeting. Mr. Lougheed often started the meeting but then left and handed over the role of Chairman to the Government Whip. Premier Getty acts as chairman for most of the meetings, and generally remains for the entire meeting. This means that he gets to hear directly the views of the MLA's from across the province. During the session, caucus meets for one-half hour every day with the exception of Thursdays, when it meets for the entire morning. Often when there isn't an evening sitting, there will be an additional caucus meeting. When the House is not in session, caucus meets for two full days every month, usually a Thursday and a Friday. The agenda is circulated ahead of time. If an MLA has a particularly urgent matter of business, he can call the Chairman of Caucus (the Premier) and have that item placed on its agenda.

Caucus committees are a very important part of the process. There are a number of subject matter committees such as Forestry, Agriculture, Health and Social Affairs, Economic Affairs and Education. Each member makes a selection of the committees he or she wishes to serve on. They will not automatically serve on those committees as the decision is made elsewhere. We are often left wondering why we were chosen to sit on a particular committee. These committees meet with the appropriate minister, and hear the various interest groups concerned with the committee's agenda. It is imperative that legislation be brought before the appropriate committee. If it does not receive the support of the committee, it is in serious difficulty. Legislation has been dropped because of opposition from a committee and has been redrafted in response to the committee's criticisms. This is where you will see blood on the ground; this is where the MLA's have their clout.

Bettie Hewes: Our caucus meets every day at eleven o'clock to work out the that day's activities with the two senior researchers and the communications director. We must be alert to and aware of the issues that are likely to arise that day and we plan the major thrust of our

Question Period. We need to anticipate what will be the first two questions of the Official Opposition.

Outside of the session, we try to meet once a week. This is often difficult as the members are very active in their constituencies. We have prepared major events outside of the capital in both the north and south of the province. Last year we convened special caucus meetings in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge devoted to the regional concerns of that area.

Ray Speaker: When Social Credit was the government so much of the responsibility was in the hands of the Premier and the Cabinet that the backbenchers took very little opportunity to introduce new legislation or new ideas. When Harry Stromm was Premier, he asked for ideas to improve the role of the backbenchers. Although a committee was established, it made no significant recommendations.

As a small opposition, we originally tried to cover all areas of concern that people would bring to us concerning any and all government departments. The unfortunate result was a lack of focus. Our research staff were engaged in massive projects which we often could not use.

Now we take each department of government and decide upon a maximum of three subjects with respect to that department, often only two will be covered in depth. We develop a careful and detailed background on each of these areas. We can then be well prepared to deal with specific questions and this is more effective.

Pam Barrett: There is a Strategic Planning Committee of Caucus which consists of the Leader, House Leader, Whip, Edmonton Caucus Chairman, Caucus Chairman and one other member elected by the Caucus. It meets every day to determine our strategy for that day; this is followed by a meeting of the full caucus in which the planning committee's recommendations are laid out, and are either approved or amended. In addition, we meet once a week as a full caucus, for half a day, not to deal with strategy as much as issues. The politics and philosophy of every individual is set forth; however as we all subscribe to the basic philosophy of the New Democrats these meetings are characterized much more by cohesiveness than by division.

At the end of session, the caucus begins by meeting every two weeks,

we may then decide to change this to once every three weeks and as a new session approaches we return to the format of every other week.

Do you foresee any transfer of influence from government caucus committees to committees of the Assembly?

Greg Stevens: I have not sensed that the opposition have been pushing for policy oriented committees with the exception that the Liberals wanted the Public Accounts Committee to meet when the House is not sitting. However, the committee did not have the funds for that.

The Members' Services Committee pretty much has a free rein and acts in the interests of the members provided the actions fall within the appropriate guidelines. The Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee's recommendations are listened to and may have an effect on government decisions. There have also been special committees from time to time such as the Workman's Compensation Committee, as well as the Committee on the Constitution, on reform of the Senate, etc.

Bettie Hewes: The legislature's committees all function relatively well. It is important to remember that each is heavily weighted in favor of the government. There are good exchanges among members as matters are explored. It is the Members' Services Committee that is more likely to get into difficulty.

There is a Special Committee that studies Workers' Compensation every four years or so. I do not think it is effective. The members do not seem to take independent positions and are supported by expert advice only from the department. I would like to see a committee of citizens look at the subject from a variety of points of view.

Ray Speaker: The one committee that appears to have taken more authority is Members' Services. The transfer of power from the government caucus to the legislature will happen only as a result of political pressure from the public on the members. As the opposition becomes more of a real political threat the government will become hesitant to push the decisions of its caucus. There is the potential for improved and increased decision-making and refining within the Legislature. This will continue to improve as we get closer to the next election. This would be a positive change.

Pam Barrett: I do not see any movement to make legislative committees more effective. Under Premier Lougheed some committees, such as the one used to study the Workers' Compensation Board, were struck to deal with matters over the life of a Legislature. The government now strikes only internal committees, which operate in a very partisan way. For example, there is a Health Care Review Committee; it is headed by a government MLA, other government MLA's are members and there are citizens chosen by the minister. Opposition members need not apply. This takes much out of the hands of the Legislature and puts inordinate power into the hands of the government caucus. I think the present government fears all-party committees because they expose the matters referred to them to debate and to public scrutiny. Premier Lougheed had a much better record in this regard; he recognized the parliamentary importance of having an opposition and did not go out of his way to exclude opposition members from participating in the decision-making process.

Are you satisfied with the procedure used for consideration of the estimates?

Greg Stevens: In 1986, the estimates system was changed as a result of a filibuster led by the present Leader of the Opposition. I believe that this was a disservice to the people of Alberta.

Before ministers would be grilled on their estimates line by line. There would be staff members in the gallery to support the minister if needed. Indeed if he could not answer all the questions he would have to be brought back.

What happens now is that opposition members simply take full advantage of the rules that permit a member to speak for thirty minutes. What we have are thirty minute speeches rather than the tough, precise questions of the past. It is simply a matter of each side making its thirty minute speeches and there is no stress on the ministers at all. It is a way for the opposition to take over Hansard.

Bettie Hewes: I am very dissatisfied with the estimates system in the Legislature. In the first place, the numbers given to the House are not very revealing. It is difficult for an opposition member to figure out just what we are dealing with. There is very little narrative to explain or justify the numbers. We are not provided with specific cost figures

for items, or with a comparison of those items in past years nor are there projections of costs into the future. Is the taxpayer getting value? Is the tax dollar being used to buy what is needed or wanted? Was the expenditure effective? We get lump sums with no qualifications.

There are twenty-five departments and additional agencies which must be reviewed by the Assembly in twenty-five sitting days. This means we have approximately two-and-one half hours to study a department. The minister starts off with a thirty minute speech filled with broad generalizations, followed by a thirty minute speech by the critic from the Official Opposition. The minister



Ray Speaker

may make a thirty minute response, a government member may make a thirty minute speech. Time simply evaporates. The current process does not allow for a detailed scrutiny of the estimates through in-depth questioning of the minister. There is no opportunity to get to the department's officials.

Ray Speaker: The problem with the budget debates and the estimates is that they lack focus. With the set-piece thirty minute speeches, they lack the more adversarial thrusting back and forth. Questions and answers are not covered in depth.

The Committee of the Whole can be very effective but that isn't the case now. With lists of members who each want to give their thirty minute speech, nothing is focused and this takes the fire and intensity out of the debate.

At one time we tried subcommittees during the examination of the estimates. I did not like this. Often the deputy minister would hold the floor and talk more than the minister. For me this was a waste of time. We need to have this debate in the most public arena where it might be possible to move the direction of the government.

Pam Barrett: Historically, the Committee of the Whole has been given the mandate to deal with estimates, bills and motions at a very detailed level. It is no longer effective, it is crucial that the Committee of the Whole be entitled to have subcommittees deal with some issues, some estimates, some bills, and some motions.

There has been subterranean fighting during this Legislature over procedure which has resulted in the need to pursue heavily political issues as opposed to detailed issues being raised in the estimates. When there was only a two person ND opposition, it used to be possible for the opposition members to raise some general political observations and then proceed with some very detailed questions. The ministers then, who felt no real political threat, would respond to the political observations and to the questions. This process would continue for a whole evening and was fairly easily accomplished. With the larger opposition the government has adopted a siege mentality; they now attempt to filibuster their own estimates! In the first place a department's estimates may not get even two hours of debate. Under the Standing Orders, ministers may take up to thirty minutes to present their own estimates, and they may take thirty minutes to respond to any other speaker. The ministers are increasingly taking advantage of this to exclude opposition speakers from getting on the floor and into the real detailed estimates. Government backbenchers are also playing this game; they may also speak for thirty minutes. Since the opposition may only get one of its members into the debate in consideration of a department's estimates, it has to try to hit every political point and some financial points within a one-half

hour presentation. It is impossible to do this at a detailed level and get into specific votes. I put the entire blame for this on the government's shoulders and I think they are abusing the spirit and intent of the Standing Orders.

What changes if any, would you like to see in the services, amenities and administration of the Alberta Legislature?

Greg Stevens: I like a short, tough legislative sitting. We can do much better as a government if we can get out to the constituency. I do not mean this in a negative way but what happens in the Legislature seems to be irrelevant to the day to day living of most Albertans. People will ask me when do we sit. I have even been asked when did I get back from Ottawa!

I would like to see some new way of voting in the House. We waste so much time waiting for the eight minute bell that calls the member to vote. Maybe some form of electronic balloting would speed up matters. Also, I would like some change to the way we televise the House. Presently the cameras are on a platform and occasionally they cause a disruption. I would prefer a more automatic system, such as the one they have in Saskatchewan. I would also like to see us fully utilize a modern computer oriented communications system so that we would have access to the information we need at our finger tips. I am a member of a subcommittee of the Members' Services Committee which is examining the possibilities for change in this area.

Bettie Hewes: I would like to see the extension of television coverage especially during the debates on the estimates which I think is crucial. The debates need to be made more lively. I suggest that instead of thirty minutes that speeches be limited to fifteen minutes per member with the same time limit for minister's responses. It is important to get more matters covered.

In this vein, the sessions of the Legislature will need to be longer; we need both a Spring and a Fall sitting. It may not be convenient for the government, but with a larger opposition we simply need more time to examine the activities of the administration in depth. I am dismayed by the number of decisions that are made when the House is not sitting. Current policies

with respect to the energy industry and serious cuts to the civil service were made during the long period between sittings. There was no apparent consultation with anybody. Some decisions appear to be delayed until the Legislature is prorogued. This style of government which encourages secrecy and the concentration of power is very provocative. The role of the Legislature in holding the government accountable needs to be strengthened.

Pam Barrett: We are truly in the age of information, everything is more detailed, as a result politicians who are the decision-makers need to devote more of their time to being made aware of detail, to scrutinize that detail, and to spend more time on the decision-making process itself. In his campaign for the leadership of his party Don Getty suggested eliminating the Fall sitting; this is not acceptable. At a minimum we need a Spring and a Fall sitting of the Alberta Legislature. Albertans pay good money to have MLA's and they deserve to get their money's worth.

The most important part of the Legislative Assembly's budget should be spent to ensure that democracy is upheld and available. Our current budget is sixteen million dollars compared to a ten and one-half billion dollar provincial budget. The government members who serve on the Members' Services Committee decided that the Official Opposition should take an eighteen per cent cut in its operating budget while the overall budget for the entire province has been cut only modestly. This curtailed our ability to respond to our public responsibilities. We are an extremely busy office that simply cannot keep up with the phone calls, correspondence, research requests and so forth.

Similarly what I call the intellectual component of the Assembly's administration, i.e the Legislature Library and the Legislative Interns also suffered from heavy budget cuts under the name of fiscal restraint. If the government was serious about imposing fiscal restraint they should do it even-handedly. These cuts on a very small budget are grossly unfair. They limit the ability of the Legislature to hold the government to account for its actions by undermining the information resources that are so vital to this function.