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# Is There Life After "The Hill"?

John Holtby

*Last November the House Board of Internal Economy instituted a program to assist ex-MPs with the move back to life "off the Hill". Similar to the assistance provided by most major employers for those who have been fired or retired, members of the last Parliament who were not re-elected are eligible for assistance in winding up their offices and for the engagement of professional counselling services for up to \$7,500. This once per lifetime provision can be used for professional advice for retirement, financial planning, re-employment or educational re-training. This article is based on interviews with some former members who have taken advantage of the program and with some experts in the area of career counselling.*

The departure from Parliament and the stresses which that puts on family life are many and varied. In some respects they are similar to those experienced in any job move but there are other aspects which are unique for politicians. A defeat at the polls may be unexpected and taken as a personal rejection rather than as a political choice made by the electorate. Picking up the pieces of an ego and the transition to the world outside Parliament can be eased with professional assistance. The flexibility of the new program lets the individual decide what is wanted and needed.

Larry Cash, a Toronto-based career consultant with Cash, Lehman & Associates, has worked with a number of former MPs in their transition away from public life. He indicates that while the business world has known about re-location counselling for a quarter of a century, it is virtually unknown in the political world. The legislative profession has few parallels in the community. Most members have two homes, and spend much of their time in airports and on the road. For some ex-MPs who raised their family during their parliamentary career adjustments can also be a challenge for the family. Often the member has been away for much of the time the children have been growing up. Week-ends which

for most people are family occasions are the times when politicians must be at constituency meetings and other functions. During these absences the spouse and children have devised their own routines and schedules. Suddenly the absent parent is on the scene, expecting to play a role which was not previously a part of the family dynamics. They may see themselves as being in charge of their family, with potentially disastrous results. In these instances the professional counsellor can assist the ex-MP in recognizing the potential difficulty and can even arrange for programs on effective parenting and family dynamics. A similar situation can arise in the case for the politician who wants to "just retire" – all of a sudden they are home. Said one spouse, "I married you for better or worse, but not for lunch!" Professional retirement counselling may assist in developing a new life pattern.

But it is the re-employment challenge where the professional can be of major assistance. "For most MPs the thought of being unproductive for six months is a frightening prospect," says Cash. "They are not generally people with a large net worth." Their situation can be compounded by domestic circumstances. The incidence of marriage breakdown by those in elected office is thought to be generally much higher than in the rest of the community. The costs of these settlements, and any family support or second relationships have a severe impact on the net worth of the former MP. These pressures sometimes result in jumping at

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the first job that comes along. Friends are frequently sources of job offers, as are those who want to exploit, for the short term, the inside knowledge which an MP possess. When this immediate return is achieved, the ex-MP loses his value to the employer.

In assisting former MP's in their career assessment and planning, Cash finds that many MPs do not think of their political experience as marketable. "They do not always see the threads and trends that have been part of their public life as being important to the corporate world." And to the surprise of some ex-MPs who think they have certain talents, extensive testing and interviewing sometimes indicate they should forget the talents they think they have and use other more real and marketable skills they have but do not recognize.

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***"In the corporate world 60% of those who have made this type of job-jump will either be in a new job, or searching for one within eighteen months. Making the right choice is important."***

For some MPs life after Parliament revolves around the prospect of a government appointment. The chance for continued public service on a board or commission is viewed as acceptable and attractive. However, the MP may be making a serious error in accepting such an offer. Members in their early 50s usually must look at building some financial equity during their remaining work years. Yet appointments are often from two to five years with chances of renewal subject to the vagaries of all political appointments. The outlook becomes more uncertain the older one becomes. But for other ex-MPs, the offer will not be made in spite of a perceived outstanding political debt. A competent professional advisor can assist in determining if an appointment is a likely option and can sometimes recommend that other options be pursued from the perspective of financial or job satisfaction.

Ken Des Roches, of Stevenson, Kellogg, Ernst & Whinney in Ottawa sees the task of the counsellor as that of assisting the client to sell his real skills to others. "Some people are intimidated by the fact that one was a Member of Parliament. Being an ex-MP means a lot of extra baggage which

sometimes gets in the way for prospective employers." In these circumstances they help the client to overcome this problem. Having a regular office routine and secretarial assistance can be important to ex-MPs who for years have had the support of services which compare very favourably to those provided to any legislator in the world. Suddenly that is gone. While the House program covers some office and secretarial aid, Des Roches feels that for those in Ottawa one of their special services is the provision of an office and a realistic working environment where there is concern for "the bottom line" which in the service-oriented Hill environment is not always a paramount consideration.

Assistance can also mean networking and preparing the right promotional material. Contacts are a major resource which the professional counsellor provides. Sometimes as many as three different résumés will be prepared to market the individual correctly to a specific job situation. The professional counsellor can also assist by conducting mock interviews in order to prepare the client for being on the other side of the desk.

Former Sudbury MP Doug Frith did not run in the last election. Faced with a self-imposed career change he used professional career counselling and testing to help him decide his future path. "I knew I would not be happy returning to my old profession of pharmacy after over a decade in political life. I needed to know if the corporate environment was right and this helped me. I was also able to use it for financial planning. I know what a good accountant can do and there were pension options to be considered."

Access to professional testing led defeated MP Michael Cassidy to use the program to assist in determining his future employment strategy. Finding it useful, Cassidy hopes that more former Members will see the program as beneficial in adjusting to life "on the outside".

Not that long ago the only thing provided to departing MPs was a shipping box, known popularly as a coffin, in which to send home their papers. The House of Commons has now accepted a responsibility to assist in a modern and humane way those who have interrupted their careers to serve in Parliament in a modern and humane way. The new services will help keep membership in the Canadian Parliament accessible to ordinary Canadians and put less pressure on governments to abuse patronage instruments to achieve similar goals.■