
Impressions of a Special Assistant

Like many students the author completed undergraduate studies with only a vague idea of what career path to follow. After graduation he found employment at the Ontario Legislative Assembly as a Member's assistant. In this article he provides some impressions of life as a legislative assistant.

by Arthur Milnes

While completing my Bachelor of Arts at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, I had enrolled in a course entitled "The Legislative Process in Canada", taught by Professor C.E.S. Franks. This class opened a new world of Parliament which went far beyond television's "30-second clips".

So, upon graduation in the summer of 1988, I turned my eyes towards employment in the parliamentary environment. It proved to be a difficult task as I was not alone in having the desire to work for a Member of Parliament.

Persistence and help from a friend paid off and my wishes were soon realized as I began my duties as Special Assistant to the Member of Provincial Parliament for Scarborough-Ellesmere at Ontario's Queen's Park on November 22, 1988. I later moved on to the office of the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health, the MPP for Ottawa East.

The essential tools for an assistant are simple; a telephone, typewriter, computer, and pen. Once assigned these, the work begins.



The first few weeks were spent familiarizing myself with the files and correspondence that existed in the office. It became apparent that my duties were going to be both varied and exciting. The amount of inquiries by constituents and the issues they were asking about were staggering. At the time of my arrival the office computer had within it almost four thousand recorded incoming letters and responses. This figure gains a

greater perspective when one considers that my Member had only been serving since September of 1987. Nor does this figure include the many hundreds of inquiries made and answered from the constituency office in suburban Toronto.

In order to answer the many questions, a Member's staff must properly utilize the resources available. Occasionally, a constituent might raise a question which can be answered in a simple fashion, using a newspaper article or a statement from *Hansard*. But even these simple answers are backed up with documentation as a MPP cannot put out incorrect information.

The most valuable resource that staff and Members are introduced to is the Ontario Legislative Library. While a university student, the hours spent searching after information and sources had been a subject of constant frustration. The Library at Queen's Park removes all the difficulties inherent in undertaking research while under severe time constraints.

A simple telephone call or visit to the Library can provide you with the most minute information or statistic needed to answer the latest letter. What makes this service even more indispensable is the speed with which the librarians provide material.

To illustrate the speed and value of the Legislative Library I simply think back to the first Private Member's Statement I prepared for my Member. These statements begin promptly at 1:30 p.m. before Question Period. After taking the better part of two days researching and writing a statement in tribute of Sir John A. Macdonald I began to get "cold feet" as the statement was approved and my boss walked over to the Legislature to deliver it. The clock stood at 1:15 p.m. when I decided to phone the library and check a fact I had placed in the statement to be sure of its authenticity. From memory I had written that Sir John was greeted with shouts of "Sir John, you'll never die" during his last campaign which I had taking place in the summer of 1891. Something made me want to question that "fact". With fifteen minutes left before the MPP for Scarborough-Ellesmere would rise and inform the House

Arthur Milnes is Special Assistant to Bernard Grandmaitre, Member for Ottawa East at the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

that Old Tomorrow had campaigned during the summer of 1891, I phoned to check this obscure fact. The reference librarian placed my call on hold as she looked for the truth about Sir John in the pages of history. Suffice to say that the library had saved myself and a MPP from accusations of being revisionist historians. By the summer of 1891, Sir John A. Macdonald was dead.

At anytime the telephone can ring with a constituent on the line needing assistance or information on an infinite range of topics. These range from the serious to the bizarre as when a person telephoned to inquire as to what colour of wallpaper the Member recommended he use in his bathroom!

The telephone is a powerful tool in the hands of an assistant. Phone calls often bring forth necessary but complicated administrative information regarding government programs from civil servants. Explanatory information from government departments can often be confusing and these calls allow us to explain rules and regulations in plain language to constituents confused by government language.

Often a letter in response to an inquiry draws on material from many different sources. Some data for a letter may come from the library, some from a phone conversation with a Minister's assistant or civil servant, some from newspapers, and some from the many files and clippings found in a Member's office. When looking for information it often becomes clear why the Member told you not to throw out that year-old press release from such-and-such Ministry or why it in fact was important to clip that certain edition of the daily paper.

Government plays such an important role in the daily experiences of Canadians that the duty of a Member as spokesperson or critic of the Government becomes very important. Many citizens contact their Member to ask for

information, express opinions, and offer suggestions regarding policies and programs.

Most members of the public quite properly refuse to take "I don't know" as an answer when contacting their Member's office.

Daily newspapers take on an important role in the life of an assistant. One must also be aware what is being reported on television and radio. Members are expected to respond to any number of issues and events each day and thus must keep well informed.

Days at the Legislature begin early in the morning and end late in the evening. Upon arrival at work the newspapers must be read and often clipped for articles to bring to the attention of the Member. Working in such an office is a valuable education in current affairs. Tenant's meetings, political briefings, or time spent catching up on correspondence or research for the Member often involve evening duties. Our legislators have a difficult and important job within our society and working for them often leaves little time for anything else.

Nevertheless I am fortunate to have spent the past year working in a legislative office. I have made contact with many people and issues that no other job could possibly offer. In fact, calling my duties a job seems to underestimate the value my time at the Ontario Legislature has been. When I finish here and go on to Law School and a permanent career, I will carry within me a wealth of experiences and skills that cannot be acquired elsewhere. ♦