
Parliament's Public Relations

by Michael MacDonald

The Hon. John Fraser's eyes widened when asked why Canadians needed to know more about Parliament's lower House. The 58-year-old Speaker of the House of Commons, perched on the edge of a chair in his Centre Block office, stabbed the air with his finger and said, "We don't teach Canadians enough about who we are."

Fraser, an MP for 18 years and the first Speaker elected by a secret ballot in 1986, described Canadians' ignorance of the role and significance of the House of Commons as a "national disgrace". He insisted that his drive to establish the Public Information Office — a centralized, non-partisan information service for the House of Commons — was a way of "filling a niche in a national need."

A passionate parliamentarian, Fraser said the PIO must try to supplement Canadians' limited political education. "There is a yearning among Canadians to know more about their country," he said in an interview. "This place is a symbol of who we are as a nation. If you're going to have a country it's essential that your people understand it."

Those recruited to set up the PIO after the idea was approved in May, 1988 have taken those words to heart. Boasting a staff of 13 and a total budget of approximately \$1 million, the PIO is well equipped to deal with Canadians' curiosity about their popularly elected national assembly. Funded through the Board of Internal Economy, an all-party body administering the Commons' \$200 million budget, the PIO was given a broad mandate: Centralize the Commons' information services and tell Canadians how the House of Commons works and why it is important.

Acting Director Susan Wright was hired by the Speaker's office in 1988 to draft a proposal that would become the PIO's blueprint. Wright, a communications consultant who once worked for the consulting firm Public Affairs International, found that MPs and bureaucrats had spent years trying to set up an information service for the House. But the result was

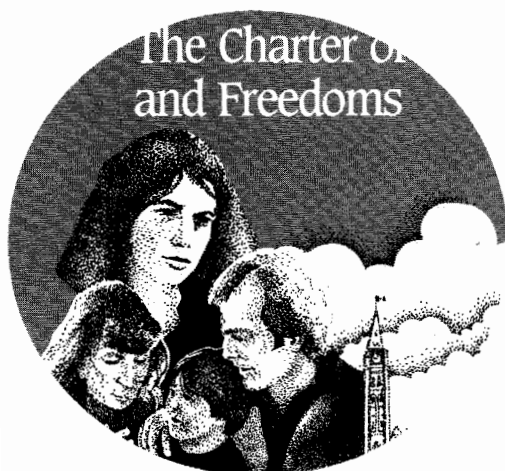
often just a few minor improvements to a badly fragmented operation. "Every couple of years they would come up with some money to print some brochures," Wright said in an interview. "Then someone would look at them and say they were ugly or out of date. It never had a fresh approach."

In June, 1985 a special committee on reform of the House of Commons recommended the House establish "more ways to communicate to the public what the House of Commons represents and how it works." The McGrath report suggested creation of a "visitors orientation centre" and an oral and video presentation that would give visitors "more comprehensive information about the House." Designed to bring a higher profile to backbench members and to the House as a whole, "the McGrath report was to make the role of the private member more important," Fraser said. "The PIO is an extension of that kind of thinking. If the people of Canada are to understand Parliament, they have to understand that there is a lot more to it than party leaders and Question Period." Fraser was blunt when he described how the Commons handled public requests for information prior to the PIO. "We didn't have any kind of sophisticated information system at all," he told reporters during the formal launch of the PIO at a media briefing last October. "It wasn't that you couldn't get information, there was just no central place that you could get at it."

Wright discovered that curious Canadians often got the run-around if they called the House for help. "My original research showed that there were tons of phone calls coming into the Clerk's office and the Speaker's office, but they were being disseminated in 10,000 different directions." Many calls were handled by patient security guards in the "op centre" ill-prepared to deal with the public. Even if callers were lucky enough to get someone in the Clerk's office, the results were often mixed. "It depended on whether you got one of the procedural clerks on a good day and if they had the time to dig stuff up and put it in an envelope for you. But then there would be other times when you would get bounced around to six different people and everybody would say, 'That's not my job.'"

The Public Information Office brought together the information systems of the House including handling the main

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The PIO's basic kit includes pamphlets on the House of Commons, Parliament Buildings, Memorial Chamber and the Library of Parliament. There are lists of former governors general, prime ministers, speakers of the House of Commons and a copy of our national anthem. The student kit includes the contents of the basic kit plus a guide to the House of Commons, a Parliamentary page program fact sheet and a guide service fact sheet. The teacher's kit includes everything in the student kit as well as a guide to Canadian citizenship; Elections Canada leaflets; source list; Question Period fact sheet; Parliament and television fact sheet; evaluation form and an excellent 66-page booklet authored by constitutional expert Eugene Forsey titled *How Canadians Govern Themselves*.

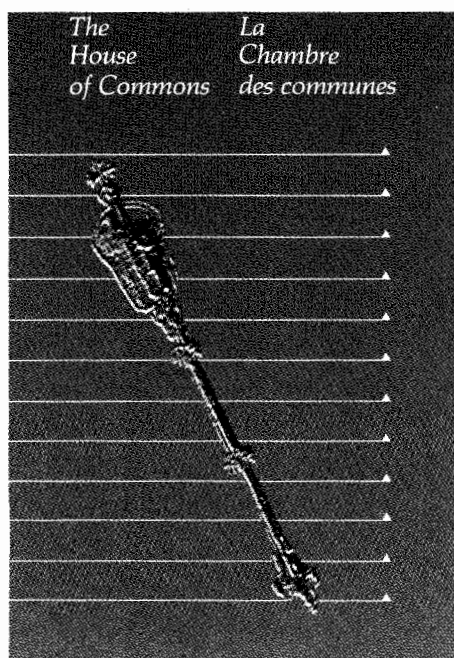
A viewer's kit comes with the basic kit, a House of Commons seating plan; minister/critic list; guide to the House of Commons; television fact sheet; Question Period fact sheet and a Parliamentary channel pamphlet. The kits can be ordered by calling the Public Information Office at 992-4793. The PIO is open from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. when the House is sitting and from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. when it is not. You can also write to:

Public Information Office
House of Commons
Room A-001
180 Wellington St.
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6



Governors General of Canada since Confederation

Governors General	Assumed Office
1. Viscount Monck, G.C.M.G.	July 1, 1867
2. Lord Ligon, G.C.M.G.	Feb. 2, 1869
3. The Earl of Dufferin, K.P., G.C.M.G., K.C.B.	June 25, 1872
4. The Marquis of Lorne, K.T., G.C.M.G.	Nov. 25, 1878
5. The Marquis of Lansdowne, G.C.M.G.	Oct. 23, 1883
6. Lord Stanley of Preston, G.C.B.	June 11, 1885
7. The Earl of Aberdeen, K.T., G.C.M.G.	Sept. 18, 1891
8. The Earl of Minto, G.C.M.G.	Nov. 12, 1899
9. Grey, G.C.M.G.	Dec. 1, 1901
10. The Hon. H.R.H. The Duke of Connaught, K.G.	July 1, 1906
11. Devonshire, K.G., G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O.	Feb. 2, 1909
12. King of Vimy, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., M.V.O.	June 11, 1917
13. The Hon. G.C.S.L. G.C.I.E., G.P.C.	Nov. 12, 1921



telephone switchboard, running the Parliamentary guide service and producing educational kits for teachers and students. About half of the PIO's \$600,000 operating budget is earmarked for information officers who field more than 5,000 calls a month. "We've taken the load off the Speaker's office and the clerk's secretary," Wright said. During its first ten months of operation, the PIO answered more than 2,500 written requests and distributed 5,200 student kits and 950 teacher kits.

The educational kits are by far the most ambitious part of the PIO's mandate. Dianne Brydon, the PIO's education officer, has been working since last June consulting with teachers, school board trustees and provincial officials. She has researched the provinces' curriculum guidelines and is tapping the brains of the provincial Council of Ministers of Education to get a better idea of what kind of teaching aids will help students better appreciate the House of Commons. "He (the Speaker) believes that every student should experience the feeling of being in the (Commons) chamber," said Brydon, a former education officer at the Diefenbaker Centre in Saskatoon. "There was a commitment to create materials that would reproduce that feeling for kids across the country." The PIO plan to supplement materials used by local school boards has met with praise from provincial officials, she said. However, Brydon conceded some MPs may have concerns about an agency like the PIO getting involved in education, an exclusive constitutional domain of the provinces. She answers by pointing to several federal departments already producing similar kits. For example, she said, Elections Canada produces a kit that helps teachers simulate voting in a federal election. "We're not walking in and telling the provinces how to teach, we're giving them supplementary materials that will help explain the Canadian system of government. We have to be careful about just shoving things into the schools...They don't want us to provide them with another text book." As for provincial politicians, Brydon said, "I don't detect any resentment. We want to have their stamp of approval." Fraser echoed Brydon's sentiments. "It's not an intrusion into provincial jurisdiction," he said. "It's a complementary service." Jim Jordan, MP for Leeds-Grenville and the Liberal's associate education and literacy critic, said he is confident the PIO won't encroach on provincial jurisdiction. "There's an awful amount of involvement (by the federal government) in education already," said Jordan, a former director of education in Lanark, Leeds-Grenville. "I find it comforting to know you can go to one source to get information. It makes it more worthwhile if constituents can deal with it themselves and they can get exactly what they want." Jordan said he had not heard MPs complaining about the PIO's involvement in education.

Brydon expects to draft a report in June. Until then, she will continue research that includes finding out if more schools use Beta instead of VHS video tapes. Eventually, she hopes to produce a series of role-playing exercises and case studies. These exercises might include following the passage of a bill

through Parliament. Brydon also wants to produce a poster depicting a typical "day in the life" of an MP.

The writing style in PIO's pamphlets and fact sheets avoids a simple recital of dry facts. Combined with colourful illustrations, the text goes beyond the obvious. For example, added to the explanation of the role of the Memorial Chamber is a reference to the construction materials brought from the three countries which were the original Allies in the First World War. In the same pamphlet, excerpts from Gabrielle Roy's book, *The Tin Flute*, and John McCrae's poem, *In Flanders Fields*, capture the mood of Canada during wartime. The text in the pamphlet describing the Parliament Buildings is particularly lively when highlighting the buildings' Gothic Revival architectural style: "Saucy gargoyles make faces at passersby, birds and animals come to life in sculpture, and events from our history are played out in stone friezes." In the teacher's kit a 66-page booklet called "How Canadians Govern Themselves," authored by constitutional expert Eugene Forsey, offers concise explanations of amorphous political institutions like the federal cabinet and political parties.

"I'm appalled in my travels by the relative ignorance Canadians have about the work and the role of Parliament."

Nelson Riis, MP, Kamloops, B.C.

The PIO's publications are excellent guides for political neophytes, but seasoned observers might find them riddled with understatement and weakened by some glaring omissions. The overtly theatrical nature of Question Period is ignored. Instead, readers are offered a luke-warm explanation for the rowdy behaviour of MPs often displayed on the nightly TV news: "Because the issues raised during this 45-minute segment are timely and of national importance, the atmosphere in the chamber can be boisterous." While the text does concede that "The publicity surrounding Question Period can obscure its significance," no mention is made of how the presence of television cameras prompts the kind of partisan theatrics that has become the trademark of Question Period.

Defending the PIO's new publications, Wright said the guide to the House of Commons is blunt when it describes how few members are attracted to the chamber when Question Period is complete because many of them have to attend committee meetings. She said the PIO intends to produce fact sheets exploring the nature of partisanship and other contentious issues, but more important work remains to be done. "We're just new. We're just developing the research. When we get further on, we'll get more into those more controversial topics. But, right now, we needed to do the absolute basics. We're not going to sugar-coat it, we have to make sure it's a balanced perception."

While it's easy to criticize the PIO because it does not encourage critical thinking, Wright argues the kits serve a more vital function. "Until people understand the fundamentals upon which the system is built, then their criticism is shallow. It doesn't have any meaning unless they understand the basics. Then they can begin to look underneath those subjects to look for the flaws." Speaker Fraser blamed the media for focusing on "acerbic" issues and neglecting coverage of the routine business and all-party commitments that highlight the successes of governing. "They're not interested in making people understand why we have a parliamentary system as opposed to a congressional system." He also insisted the PIO would be free from partisan tampering. "We do not, under any circumstances, want to run a propaganda shop. It's not a partisan thing. The PIO is here to let people get a better sense of what our country is all about."

In many ways the parliamentary guide service is the front line of the education battle with more than a half million people given the standard 25-minute tour last year. This service now comes under the PIO and plans are in the works to revamp the text used by the guides during the tour, Brydon said. The PIO also hopes to tailor their tours for the many special interest groups that come to Parliament Hill. To reach a wider audience the PIO has produced materials for the visually and hearing impaired and there is also a 29-minute video cassette titled "The Morning Tour: An Adventure in Canada's Parliament." The video is a dramatized tour of the Parliament buildings with information on Canada's parliamentary system.

Located across the street from the Parliament Buildings in A-001 of the Wellington building — the same building that contains offices of the Official Leader of the Opposition — the PIO dwarfs its sister service in Parliament's upper House. Senate Information Services, established as a part-time operation in 1981 and then as a full branch in 1984, has two full-time staff and a total budget of \$160,000. Co-ordinator Gord Lovelace said his is a lean operation that has a very different mandate from its counterpart in the Commons.

Unlike the PIO, Senate Information Services handles media relations, stages press conferences and distributes Senate committee reports, he said. Lovelace's branch is also responsible for formal openings of Parliament, Speeches from

the Throne and installation of governors general. The PIO's efforts to raise awareness about the House of Commons has added to Lovelace's workload, and he said he recently made a proposal to the Senate to expand his operation. Lovelace gushes with pride when describing how his office differs from the PIO. "We've been around for nine years and we know where are all the buttons to press. We know where to get things for free. We are extremely non-bureaucratic. We don't sign forms, we just call people. That creates a rapport that ultimately allows you to do things very fast and very cheap." The Senate service also produces "tailor-made" educational kits and coordinates programs like the Forum for Young Canadians and the Terry Fox youth program which bring more than 10,000 students into the upper chamber annually.

Lovelace said he would prefer if Parliament had one, centralized information service instead of separate offices for each House. "I have no problem with centralization. As a matter of fact, I offered a long time ago to take over services for both Houses." But according to Robert Desramaux, director of support and information systems for the House of Commons, such a scheme would be impossible because each House jealously guards its turf. Although his office coordinates many services for both Houses, Desramaux said a great deal of duplication remains because officials with the Senate and the House of Commons like to assert their independence. He drew an analogy to the Canadian federation saying it would be more efficient for this country to have one, centralized government, but a division of powers is preferred.

Asked if the Senate might get short-changed in the publicity it receives because its information service has a relatively small budget, Lovelace said his office will remain "competitive." But Desramaux argued it was wrong to compare the two services because the Commons is almost three times the size and its members deserve a higher profile because their role in governing is more important. Nelson Riis, the House Leader for the New Democratic Party, agreed. "If you study Canadian politics it soon becomes clear that the House of Commons is where the action is and the House of Commons is where the public's attention is focused. The House of Commons, therefore, was the appropriate place to start (for the PIO) in terms of emphasis." 