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# What Kind of Representatives do Canadians Want?

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by David C. Docherty

*Observers of the House of Commons cannot help but notice that the mood and decorum in the House of Commons deteriorated almost immediately after the close NO vote in the Quebec referendum. As the aftermath of the referendum unfolds, and the federal government cedes more power to the provinces, the roles and responsibilities of members of parliament may come under closer scrutiny. This article is based on surveys and interviews with members of the 34th and 35th Parliaments undertaken by the author as part of a larger project on member's views of representation.*

**T**here are many reasons for the scepticism of Canadians toward our politicians. Party discipline keeps some members from voting as they otherwise might; pension plans seem too generous; there is a sense among the public that political parties listen to the public only during elections; they see a fascination with constitutional reform that has little to do with the day-to-day lives of most citizens; and we see a continual power struggle between levels of government over power and scarce resources.

Political scientists André Blais and Elizabeth Gidengil found that over 80% of Canadians believe that politicians have no intention of keeping the promises they made during election campaigns.<sup>1</sup> In the 1993 election 80% of Canadians felt that soon after arriving in Ottawa, MPs would lose touch with the people they were elected to serve.<sup>2</sup> The public sees members of parliament as following a classic trustee view of representation, where members are supposed to make decisions based not on what their constituents want, but what elected legislators think best for the riding and country as a whole. It is a view the public is not happy holding, as they wish their

legislators would be more immediately responsive to riding demands and opinions.

Canadians, it seems, do not think federal politicians are doing the job they were elected to do. It is clear that there is a gap between what the public wants and expects politicians to do, and how members of parliament themselves see their job. What Canadians think is the proper role of a federal representative differs substantially with the views held by legislators. For citizens and politicians, the first step in closing the gap is understanding where the break lies. Exactly what do Canadians want in a representative and what do representatives think Canadians want of them.

*Of all of these problems, perhaps the most serious for individual politicians is the charge that they do not listen to the women and men who elected them.*

A December 1993 Gallup poll asked Canadians to rank the importance of five different responsibilities of federal legislators. A similar question was asked of MPs in the 34th Parliament (1988-1993) and non-incumbent candidates in the 1993 federal election. The responses of

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successful Liberal and Reform candidates (now rookie MPs in the 35th Parliament) are used in this analysis.<sup>3</sup>

The comparison among veteran office holders, new members of parliament and the general public is quite telling. It is clear that what Canadians want from their MPs is not what MPs think is important. Interestingly, rookie MPs reflect the views of citizens on questions of representation to a much greater degree than do veteran legislators. In this light, it does appear that MPs lose touch with the public they are elected to serve. Time spent in office make MPs forget the desires of those individuals who sent them to Ottawa.

this form of district service. But time spent in the nation's capital has seemingly drawn members away from this task. Veteran MPs rank this duty third.

According to members of parliament, however, their lack of interest in communicating government policy or protecting the riding does not indicate a lack of concern on their part with the plight of their constituents. Members of the 34th Parliament indicated that their most important duty was to help individuals who had problems with a government department. Interestingly this is the duty that Canadians ranked last. This is where the true gap lies. Canadians do not see the job of MP as

### Ranked Importance of a MP's Duties

Responsibility	MPs, 34th Parliament 1988-93	Rookie MPs 35th Parliament <sup>4</sup>	Public
Protect interests of constituency	3	1	2
Helping people who have personal problems with government	1	3	5
Ensuring bureaucracy is administering government policy	5	5	3
Keep in touch with constituents about what government is doing	4	2	1
Debating and voting in Parliament	2	4	4

So where does the gap lie? What exactly do voters want and what are MPs happier doing. According to the public, a member of parliament should spend more effort on communicating government policy. For Canadians, the "keeping in touch" function was the most important job of an MP. As candidates, both new Liberal and Reform MPs ranked it second. Members of the previous parliament ranked it fourth of five. That the public ranks "keeping in touch" so high compared to veteran legislators, helps in part to explain why citizens feel that politicians do not listen to the public. Members of parliament do not see this as an integral part of their job description.

The public also thinks that an MP should exert more effort on riding wide matters. Close behind communicating, in the eyes of citizens, is acting as a riding advocate. Riding advocacy means ensuring that decisions made in Ottawa do not adversely affect the member's constituency. Canadians, therefore, seem to be suggesting that members of parliament have a duty to act as a collective representative. As candidates in 1993, Liberal and Reform members also placed a premium on

one of helping individuals, at least not compared to larger, riding wide functions. Given that members think this is their central task, it is little wonder Canadians think MPs do not listen or respond as they would like.

Recognizing where the deviation between public wishes and legislator's views on representation rests is much easier than identifying the cause of this discrepancy. From a legislator's perspective there are numerous possible reasons that they might view individual service as their primary responsibility. First, members see such work as an effective way of maintaining their reputations as problem solvers. People in the riding who encounter problems with government agencies or departments expect MPs to help resolve these difficulties.<sup>5</sup> As one member of the 34th Parliament stated, "Helping people will not get me re-elected. But not doing it will sure get me defeated" (Interview July 1993). This member recognized that local service has few direct electoral benefits but remains a requisite part of their job.

Members also take pleasure in the fact that they are often successful in helping people in their ridings. By

contrast, tackling larger public policy issues within an executive-centred parliamentary system is more frustrating. Members may be more likely to find victory in solving individual concerns than they are in attempting to make sweeping policy changes. As a result, there may be a greater attachment to working on problems that can be resolved. As one rural MP explained, "Not only is this important work, but it is good work. After a frustrating few weeks in Ottawa, it is nice to go to an event [in my district] and see someone who says 'Thanks for helping me with my pension' or whatever" (Interview October 1994). These types of reflections were common among most veteran legislators.

Further, helping people means avoiding partisan involvement, or perhaps even more importantly, conflict with one's own party. Given the primary role of party discipline within the Canadian legislative system, it is not surprising that many members emphasize activities with little or no partisan content. Acting as a local trouble shooter means avoiding conflict with your party, leader and government. One veteran member summed up this attitude nicely by comparing constituents to consumers. "We [MPs] love constituents who have troubles. It is black and white. A constituent is always right, and we just have to convince the bureaucracy that they are wrong" (Interview, September 1995).

All of this suggests that one-on-one service has two benefits for members. First, within their ridings it accentuates their ability to get things done, thereby increasing their local profile. Whether or not the electoral benefits are direct or even present is secondary. Members avoid this work at their own risk. Second, it provides an opportunity for members to demonstrate their effectiveness, despite their status in the House. Members can resolve problems locally without being in cabinet or holding any other position of authority. Additionally, such local work does not force members to take a position that might clash with party policy.

Yet the emphasis that members of parliament place on local service does not come automatically with their election. In fact, as the Table on the previous page suggests, an emphasis on individual service may well be a learned response.

Neither Liberal nor Reform candidates seemed terribly enthused about having to do individual case work if they won office, ranking it third of the five responsibilities. Again, this suggests that candidate views on questions of representation are closer to the public than experienced politicians. Yet even here the difference among groups are notable. Candidates do not emphasize one-on-one help like veteran politicians do, but neither do they shun this work, as the public would have them.

Further, once in office, many of these new rookie MPs, Liberal and Reform alike, have come to accept this as a more important part of their job. Interviews with some of these new lawmakers six and eighteen months after their 1993 election revealed that many were not prepared for the high demands that individual constituents placed on them. Although the interviews were selective and therefore not generalizable, they did uncover hints that the first couple of years of office transform the representational views of these newcomers.

***Many rookie MPs, after being immersed in the work world of elective office, indicated that they spend far more time on this one-on-one service than they thought they would.***

One Reform member, who prior to his election expressed little desire for such work, explained his transformation just six months into the job. "My constituency office spends all their day on this, and I spend a good part of mine doing this. But if people are coming to us for help we have to provide it. It is part of my job" (Interview March 1994). Many other first time members, Liberal and Reform alike, indicated that demand alone made them realize the importance of this part of their job.

A Liberal rookie echoed such thoughts when she stated "my predecessor told me this was a busy constituency office, but I had no idea how busy until I was [elected]. It is perhaps the least glamorous part of my work, but once you realize that they [constituents] have no place else to turn to, and after you help them, you understand it is the most vital service we provide" (Interview October 1995). Many other rookies gave similar accounts of how they have come to appreciate the importance of one-on-one problem solving. The dilemma for politicians, rookies and veterans alike, is that not enough voters share these views. Despite the number of people turning to constituency offices for help, most voters do not see this as an important function.

It appears, therefore, that Canadians are less charitable toward citizens who need assistance working their way through government programs than are our elected representatives. And maybe this is proper. Elected representatives should be helping people. The problem is, that the longer an MP spends in Ottawa, the more they come to believe this part of their job is their most important responsibility and the more energies they devote to this function. At the same time, they are

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alienating themselves from those Canadians who do not need this type of assistance.

Members of parliament could go a long way to regaining public respect by devoting more of their time and efforts on the communication function. Canadians want to be kept informed of the goings on in Ottawa, and not just from the media. Members could start thinking of how to increase their presence in their ridings and improve on their ability to communicate with their constituents. But doing so will not be easy, nor will it leave others unaffected. The more emphasis they place in performing one task, the less time and energy they will have to maintain their present duties. That would be too bad.

### Notes

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1. Andre Blais and Elizabeth Gidengil. 1991. *Making Representative Democracy Work: the Views of Canadians*. Volume 17, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, (Toronto:Dundurn Press).
  2. Harold, Clarke, Jane Jenson, Larry Leduc and Jon H. Pammett. 1995. *Absent Mandate: Canadian Electoral Politics in an era of Restructuring*. 3rd Edition, (Toronto, Gage Press) p. 178.
  3. The response rate for members of the 34th Parliament was just over forty percent for non-cabinet ministers. The response rate for candidates was lower (33%). However, a subset of the 1993 candidate survey respondents, those individuals who were successful in their bid for office, includes half of all rookie Liberal and Reform MPs in the 35th Parliament. It is this subset that is used in this examination. BQ MPs participated in the 34th Parliament survey but not in the candidate survey.
  4. Although the responses presented in this column are calculated from rookie Liberal and Reform MPs, these individuals responded to the questions while candidates for office in 1993, and therefore reflects their views prior to their election.
  5. See John Ferejohn and Brian Gaines. 1991. "The Personal Vote in Canada" in Herman Bakvis ed. *Representation, Integration and Political Parties in Canada*. Volume 13, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing.
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