
Outreach Programs for Legislators in Saskatchewan

Hon. Glenn Hagel, MLA

Public cynicism about politics is a great concern to many parliamentarians. To counter it, some legislatures have developed "outreach programs" to explain how the parliamentary system works. In this article the Speaker of the Saskatchewan Legislature outlines what is being done in his province.

When considering whether to let my name stand for Speaker the issue of public cynicism was very much on my mind. One reason I decided to seek the office was because it offered an opportunity to do something positive in this area.

The Speaker is recognized by the public as a neutral official. Therefore, in speaking out in support of the system in a proactive kind of way the Speaker is not seen as self-serving.

One of the important roles we play is to represent the full Legislative Assembly. Usually we think of that as meaning we meet with parliamentarians and diplomats from other parts of the country or other parts of the world. But we also serve as diplomats with our own people.

Part of my platform, as I campaigned for Speaker and met with each of the individual Members was to talk with them about what I saw as a new role for the Speaker, at least in our province. I spoke about three objectives, which have since become the formally stated objectives of my parliamentary outreach program:

- To increase the understanding of parliamentary democracy and how it works;
- To increase the level of respect for the institution;



- To sow seeds of dreams for young people that to serve in public office is an honourable career choice.

Once elected Speaker I wrote to all Members outlining how this parliamentary outreach was going to happen, and how they were going to be involved. I was not going there *for* them. I was going *with* them to their constituencies, and they would be very much a part of this parliamentary outreach.

I decided we should direct our energies toward the leaders of the future. Young people have not yet become cynical and soon will be choosing to participate in

Glenn Hagel is Speaker of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly. The following is an edited version of a presentation made by Speaker Hagel at the 14th Presiding Officers Conference held in Edmonton, Alberta on January 24 and 25, 1997.

public life. We worked with the Department of Education to link our programme to the curriculum. The schools understood that a visit by the Speaker was not entertainment. They were encouraged to prepare for the visit and were supplied with materials and suggestions on how to prepare.

As I thought about this issue I came to the conclusion that cynicism is an emotional as well as an intellectual problem. It has to be attacked at both levels. I reflected on what were some of the forces in my life and what caused me and other people to form goals. I remembered the excitement of my first hockey sweater. Could not the Speaker's hat, suit and robe, serve a similar purpose? When I meet students I invite them to try on the Speaker's hat. I place it on their head, look into their eyes and say something like, "How does it feel? It might be yours some day?" Almost always the answer to the question is positive. Of course it did not always have the desired effect. One young student asked if I was a pirate? And there was the reporter who asked, "when you dress like that, do you kind of feel like a dork?"

Generally, however, the programme has provoked thinking about the future. Many students show a serious interest in our parliamentary democracy and have suggested they are thinking of getting involved. In the words of a student, "We were surprised to learn that MLAs work for the government for the same reasons we work for the student representative council."

I try to explain that the reality of politics is not shouting at people as they see in the media. Politics is more than what they see in Question Period. My presentation always includes stories about the historical role of the Speakers in establishing parliamentary democracy. I tell my audience how easily they could kill democracy if they wanted to since democracy requires both knowledge and participation. Its greatest enemies are ignorance and apathy.

I also talk to students about considering politics as a profession when thinking about their future. But I mention that if they are looking for a job with short hours and high pay, where they spend lots of time with their family, and where they get lots and lots of praise, forget it. Politics has none of that. Sixty, seventy hours a week is normal. But even though there is lots of hard work and long hours, it is a rewarding profession.

If they conclude that this job is for them, then I encourage them to follow their dream. If they think about it, and conclude that this an important job, but it is not for them, that too is okay. In that case, I ask them to make a commitment to always be an informed participant in our democracy. If they do that, if we all do that, I give them a guarantee that Canada will continue to be the number one nation in which to live.

I am usually asked some common questions: "Why are MLAs so rowdy? Why do they fight all time?", or complaints "All they do is talk!, Government is too slow!, Politicians don't listen!" I talk about the Legislature being a place where passions and differences belong, but personal attacks do not. I mention that the word 'parliament' is derived from the French verb that means "to talk", and that the Legislature is a place where all sides of issues can be heard; hence the talking. As to listening Members are in the business of listening to their constituents and lobby groups. I always finish off the same way, by saying to them: "If you have drawn the conclusion that I think we have the best system of democracy in the entire world right here in Canada and Saskatchewan, you are right. That is exactly how I feel. But just because we have the best system is no guarantee that you get good government.

Good government is made up of good people. A good person, in a nutshell, is somebody who cares not just about me or, me and my family, or me and my next-door neighbours, but somebody who cares about all of us.

An effective outreach program is not something to be taken lightly. It has been hard work. When I sat down with my staff at the beginning, I said, "Let us aim to give 50 presentations." In three and a half months between the middle of October 1996 and the end of January 1997 when our session was ready to start, I gave 74 presentations. About 70 of those were to schools, the rest to adult groups. I met just over 3,200 students in 34 constituencies.

I visited 22 of the 41 constituencies held by government members, 7 of the 11 ridings held by the official opposition as well as 4 of 5 constituencies held by the third party. In 90% of the cases the local MLA was there with me.

I told the story of parliamentary democracy but the living example was their MLA. For many MLAs it was the first time they were able to get into that school because some schools viewed politics as a dirty thing, and they did not invite politicians to visit. In advance of a visit, news releases were sent to the local media and the news coverage throughout the province has been overwhelmingly positive.

When our House resumed sitting on March 6, 1997, many Members from all parties spoke highly of the Outreach programme. I look forward to continuing and building upon it.