
The Alberta Youth Parliament Project

by Gary Garrison

Democracy came alive for 83 Alberta grade 10 social studies students who spent five and a half hours serving as MLAs during the first Mr. Speaker's Alberta Youth Parliament on April 15 and 16, 1999. Fourteen teachers participated in the concurrent teachers' program.

It was as close to the real thing as the students could get, right down to live television coverage and authentic issues of Votes and Proceedings, Orders of the Day, and *Hansard* (all of which were subsequently posted on the Assembly's web site, www.assembly.ab.ca). At a bearpit session with Speaker Ken Kowalski, several teachers commented that the briefing sessions were too short, the pace was too hectic, students had to work too late into the night preparing, and nobody had much of a chance to develop comradery within their caucuses. "The whole experience is so real," Speaker Kowalski replied. "These are the same comments MLAs make after every election!"

With the initial impetus provided by Speaker Kowalski, this program was sponsored by the Royal Canadian Legion, Alberta-Northwest Territories Command, and developed by Legislative Assembly staff with the help of six high school social studies teachers nominated by the Social Studies Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Student participants each represented one of Alberta's 83 constituencies in the Legislative Assembly of the fictitious province of Rupertland. A key difference from many other model parliaments was that the student MLAs were paired with real MLAs and offered the chance to experience the representative side of the

MLAs' role by talking with their own MLA, shadowing their MLA, or spending time in the MLA's office.

The quality of the debate was outstanding from the start and it never deteriorated all day. The tremendous energy and creativity displayed in the Chamber by these students was a delight to experience. With young leaders of that quality coming out of our high schools in two more years, we Albertans have a great future ahead of us.

Speaker Ken Kowalski

The application process required each student to write about why they wanted to participate in the youth parliament and how they would share the experience with others afterwards. They submitted two letters of reference as well, one from a teacher and one from someone in their community. Selection was based on their having a good academic record, leadership qualities, an interest in community and current affairs, and an interest in Canadian history. Organizers evaluated all applicants from each constituency against the selection criteria, choosing one to represent his or her own constituency. Alternates were evaluated against the same criteria and selected to

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Speaker Ken Kowalski receives the Alberta Youth Parliament's official new Mace from Ms Dani Krystle Keller of Vegreville Composite High School. The school's student council sponsored the design and construction of the Mace, which was made by one of the school's teachers.

represent the constituencies from which no applications were received.

The program began with a lunch with Alberta MLAs on Thursday, April 15. About 50 MLAs attended, a phenomenal turnout at any time, much less on a busy day during session. This was a key indicator of the level of support the members gave the new youth parliament from start to finish.

After lunch, the Speaker introduced the student and teacher participants as well as Legion representatives in the galleries, where they sat to observe Oral Question Period. They then had a VIP tour of the Legislature Building and spent the rest of the afternoon in briefing sessions. The students were placed in three different rooms, one for each party caucus, and the teachers were in a fourth room. The briefings involved presentations on their own roles by ministers, by opposition members, and by private members from both the opposition and government. Members of the press gallery led the final briefing session.

After a trip across the river to the Strathcona Legion Hall for dinner, the students returned to the Legislature for an evening of caucus work. Program organizers had decided early in the planning that a minority parliament would provide a clear contrast with the party breakdown in the Alberta Legislature and would best highlight a parliamentary principle often overlooked: that the Assembly, not the government, is supreme. To encourage the students' creativity and imagination, organizers created three fictitious party platforms, three new party names, and even a new name for the province: Rupertland. The name alluded to Rupert's Land, the huge area

which included Alberta and much of western and northern Canada and which was later named the Northwest Territories.

I learned one million times more than I ever could have without this experience. The chance to work as a party on our own was fantastic!

Grade 10 student participant

Prior to coming to Edmonton on April 15, the students had received the party platform outlines, the draft Order Paper, and two news articles about the results of the recent Rupertland election. In that election, the governing Municipal Party caucus was reduced from a majority of 45 to 30 seats, the Official Opposition United Rural Party shrank from 28 to 25 seats, and the Referendum Party grew from 10 to 28 seats. When they arrived at the Legislature for their evening caucus meetings, participants received a news leak commenting on the highlights of the Throne Speech they would hear the next day.

Under the tutelage of Alberta's Table Officers and with the help of the teacher participants, the caucuses spent three hectic hours getting ready for the next day's session. They received briefings on parliamentary procedure, selected party leaders and cabinet/shadow cabinet members, and worked in small groups of five or six to brainstorm arguments to use in debate and issues to raise during question period. These caucus meetings contin-

Purpose of the Youth Parliament Students' Component

Mission: To develop in grade 10 students an interest in, and an understanding of, Alberta's parliamentary democratic process.

Objectives:

To provide an experience of the parliamentary process which will develop among youth an understanding of:

- ♦ How our parliamentary system facilitates decision-making on current provincial issues,
- ♦ The roles and responsibilities of an MLA both as a legislator and constituency representative,
- ♦ The diversity of points of view on provincial issues,
- ♦ The principle of public accountability in our parliamentary system,
- ♦ The rights and responsibilities of Albertans to govern themselves.

Teachers' Component

Mission: To enhance the teaching of parliamentary democracy in Alberta.

Objectives:

- ♦ To develop more effective tools for teaching about parliamentary democracy and responsible citizenship.
- ♦ To provide a forum for sharing ideas, experiences, and methods of teaching about the parliamentary process.
- ♦ To develop leaders in the teaching profession to champion the teaching of parliamentary democracy and responsible citizenship in the community.
- ♦ To provide the opportunity to interact with MLAs and parliamentary staff.
- ♦ To become aware of the resources, services, and support provided by Alberta's parliament.

ued formally on Friday morning at separate working breakfasts, but party leaders were busy informally negotiating deals well into the night at the hotel.

By 9 a.m. Friday the students were at their pre-assigned seats in the Chamber as Rupertland's Sergeant-at-Arms, Oscar J. Lacombe, ceremoniously announced the arrival of the Lieutenant Governor, a role played by Commander Tom Barton, then president of the Alberta-Northwest Territories Command of the Royal Canadian Legion. The students, at first nervous and tentative in these intimidating surroundings, gained confidence as the day progressed. They quickly learned that the way to score points in this House was to react swiftly on their feet while, with as much authority as they could muster, challenge opposing policies and defend their own as articulately as possible. But just like newly elected members in real parliaments, they had to be reminded of technical details. "We don't look at raised hands here. We stand, the parliamentary way of selection," the Deputy Speaker noted during debate on a motion.

During the day the Rupertland Assembly approved two government bills, one creating the position of environmental ombudsman and the other adding a compulsory work experience component to the school curriculum. The Assembly also passed a bill on mandatory school uniforms and private members' motions calling for a citizenship awareness program in schools and cleaner power generation. The student MLAs defeated several items including an opposition bill to implement direct democracy and private members' motions to establish a four-day workweek, to restrict teenage driving, and to abolish postsecondary tuition fees. The students' final act in the Assembly was a dramatic nonconfidence vote as the two opposition parties joined forces to topple the fragile minority government.

For many of the students, some of whom stayed up until the early morning hours Friday cramming for the actual session day, it was an exhausting but enlightening two days which opened their eyes to the realities of the parliamentary process. The teachers' component of the

Rupertland Party Platforms

| The Referendum Party | The United Rural Party | The Rupertland Municipal Party |
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| direct democracy through the use of new technology | defending and supporting the agricultural industry | infrastructure improvement |
| proportional representation | soil and land conservation | greater power for urban areas |
| initiative and recall | fighting against big business | representation by population |
| free and open discussion of public policy matters | defending provincial rights | regulating agricultural practices |
| universal postsecondary education | individualism and self-reliance | strict environmental protection legislation and enforcement |
| compulsory minimum sentences for young offenders | laissez-faire economics | supporting the rights of working people |
| free enterprise | | government intervention in the economy |
| | | the social safety net |

program involved 14 grade 10 teachers attending their own briefing sessions, facilitating the caucus preparations, and participating in the bearpit session with the Speaker and a separate discussion period. As with the students, the goal of the teachers' program was to place them at the centre of the province's democratic process and allow them to experience its operations first-hand. Organizers designed the program to make teachers more aware of resources, services, and support provided by the Assembly and thereby to better equip them to teach parliamentary democracy and responsible citizenship, offered the teachers a chance to interact with MLAs and parliamentary staff, and provided a forum for sharing ideas, experiences, and teaching methods. But all the teachers agreed that the most inspiring part of the program was watching the debate itself.

Afterwards, the teachers were unanimous that participation in the youth parliament dramatically increased their ability to teach citizenship. They also returned home with a renewed belief in the parliamentary process. "This exercise gives me more faith in our present system of government and in the capabilities of future parliamentarians," one teacher said. Another believed that his own knowledge of the process had grown enormously.

Sergeant-at-Arms Brian Hodgson's close personal ties with the Royal Canadian Legion helped secure their sponsorship for the project. The Assembly had also benefited from Legion support early in 1998 when the Legion presented the Assembly with a new Black Rod.

"We knew we wanted an organization that was provincewide and that was present in most communities in the province," Mr. Hodgson noted, "a grassroots organization representing ordinary people in Alberta. The Legion has a very strong interest in patriotism and the monarchy, and they are keen on ceremonial events as well as youth programs."

I feel more like a participant than an interpreter of the Social Studies Text. I have been to the mountain.

Grade 10 social studies teacher

For their part, Legion members considered their participation in the model parliament a rare honour. Commander Barton's performance as Lieutenant Governor was a thrill for him and for all the Legionnaires he represented. "Who'd have imagined an old farmer from Loughheed sitting in the Speaker's Chair of the Alberta Legislature?" he joked, adding that he would always remember the experience as a highlight of his life.

The Legion's support included chaperoning the students and escorting them to and from their hotel, as well as paying expenses for transportation, food, and accommodation. Many Legionnaires stayed in the Assembly's galleries all day long to observe the student MLAs in session. "I was blown away by the generosity of the Legion," marvelled one student in a follow-up evaluation.



Prior to the first session of Rupertland's Legislative Assembly, all student and teacher participants gathered on the front steps of the Alberta Legislature with Speaker Kowalski, Legion representatives, and program organizers.

But it was money and effort well spent, according to Legion members. "To say that the first Mr. Speaker's Alberta Youth Parliament was a success would be an understatement," Legionnaire Wayne Roberts explained. "Not only did the students leave excited and educated about our system of government, but so did everyone else involved, including the MLAs and Legislative staff." In fact, the Legion has committed to long-term funding for the program so it can be an annual event.

When the students applied for the program, they knew that part of their responsibility, if selected, would be to spread the word about the program to their communities the following year. "I am counting on you to be our best

promoter of this event in your area, especially among those eligible to participate next year but also with parents, teachers and classmates," Speaker Kowalski noted in a letter sent to participants. To that end, every participant received a complete videotape of the proceedings and the official *Hansard*, including the Votes and Proceedings and Order Paper.

After the youth parliament ended, several MLAs read Members' Statements in the House congratulating the participants for a job well done. "I highly commend the partners in this joint project," one MLA remarked. "These students can surely be our leaders of tomorrow."