
Parliamentary Secretaries in the 36th Parliament

by David Gamache Hutchison

This article looks at the history, legal status, and experiences of some Parliamentary Secretaries in the 1st session of the 36th Parliament. In a political system where backbenchers are occasionally referred to as "nobodies," do these Executive Backbenchers enjoy a special influence in Canadian governance?

The office of Parliamentary Secretary, first introduced in Canada during the First World War, provides government backbenchers with the opportunity to gain some executive and departmental experience, while also allowing the Prime Minister and senior ministers to gauge their abilities. Although the position serves this twofold function, it has also been a useful tool of the government to reward loyal backbenchers or to restrain irritating mavericks. By co-opting the latter group, the position restrains those who once sought to challenge the governing party.

Previous studies indicate that the position's legal status is ambiguous, that its roles and responsibilities are undefined, and that its impact is unpredictable. This lack of definition has reduced the influence Parliamentary Secretaries have on Canadian Governance.

History

The Canadian office has its origins in the British parliamentary tradition. Although it is difficult to determine clearly how and when the generic position of "Parliamentary or Under Secretary" came into existence, most observers date its arrival to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the "monarch's ministers" were transformed into the modern British ministerial form of

government. As increased powers were devolved upon Ministers and Secretaries of State, the Acts of Parliament generally included a provision for an Under-Secretary of State and often, but not always, Ministers were provided a Parliamentary Secretary.¹ The first mention of a Parliamentary Secretary position in Canada may have come in 1850, when Robert Baldwin, an earlier proponent of responsible government, recommended that the Province of Canada establish a second "political office" to assist Ministers in their departmental duties. Sir Charles Ad-derly, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the colonies, piloted the British North American Act through the British House of Commons in 1867, for the Colonial Secretary Lord Carnarvon who sat in the House of Lords.

As Canada entered the twentieth century and the demands on federal cabinet ministers began increasing, numerous proposals were made to relieve ministers of some of their duties and to provide training for potential cabinet ministers. In 1887, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald established three "sub-Ministers," with the office of Solicitor General to assist the Minister of Justice and Comptrollers of Customs and Inland Revenue to assist respectively the Minister of Trade and Commerce and the Minister of Finance. Concerning these "sub-Ministers" Macdonald said: "It is also provided that the heads of these sub-departments shall be Under-Secretaries as it were – to go in and sit, but not to be members of the Cabinet."⁴ Nonetheless, there existed an increasing desire among Parliamentarians to establish the formal position of Parliamentary Secretary under the Minister as the Brit-

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ish had done with Under-Secretaries for Secretaries of State and Parliamentary Secretaries for Ministers.³

The development of the Parliamentary Secretary in Federal Parliament practice was ultimately attributed to the demands of war. In order to relieve the heavily burdened Minister for External Affairs and the Minister for Militia and Defence, Prime Minister Robert Borden appointed Hugh Clark, MP for North Bruce, and Fleming McCurdy, MP for Shelburne and Queens, as their respective Parliamentary Secretaries in 1916. In 1918, a third Parliamentary Secretary was appointed to assist the minister responsible for the Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment. These first Parliamentary Secretaries were appointed by Order in Council and were given an additional \$5,000 per year to supplement their basic salary as Members of Parliament.⁴ Although Borden's experiment appeared to be a rather earnest attempt at replicating the British system, the three Parliamentary Secretary positions died a natural death with the 13th Parliament, in 1921.

The revival of the Parliamentary Secretary in Canadian Parliamentary practice did not occur again until the Second World War. The 1943 Throne Speech outlined the King government's need for ministerial assistants. Via Order-in-Council, King appointed seven "parliamentary assistants." The motion to provide salaries for the new assistants read:

... appointed by the governor in council to be a parliamentary assistant to assist a minister of the crown in such a manner and to such extent as the minister may determine and to represent his department in the House of Commons in the absence of the minister therefrom, a salary of four thousand dollars per annum...⁵

The wording of this motion and the ensuing debate first outlined the assumed role and responsibilities of the new position. King made it clear "that the assistant to a minister would be expected to help the minister in any way the minister may think his services are likely to be most advantageous."⁶ He also emphasized that although parliamentary assistants would be *persona grata* to the minister, they would not be held responsible to Parliament, as a minister normally would be. While King was devolving upon the new assistants the ability to act and speak on behalf of the department and the minister, ultimately it was still the minister who was responsible to Parliament. Nonetheless, the roles and responsibilities of the new position may have been as unclear as its name. In the same speech, King referred to the new position by three terms: "assistant minister," "assistant to the minister," and "parliamentary assistant."

This informal, non-statutory system of appointing Parliamentary Assistants continued until 1958, when the Conservative government of John Diefenbaker sus-

ended it with the intention of introducing legislation aimed at giving these appointments a statutory basis. With the largest majority in the history of the Canadian House of Commons, the Diefenbaker government passed the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* in 1959. Not only did this legislation give the position its present name, but it also took steps to formalize the position, which had been so ambiguous under the King and St. Laurent governments. As provided in Section 3 of the Act: "The Parliamentary Secretary or Secretaries shall assist the minister in such a manner as the minister directs." In the Debate on the Bill, Diefenbaker said: "... the system is one that will bring about a degree of apprenticeship for members who are chosen to occupy this high and important position (cabinet minister)."⁷ This statement implied that the tasks of the Parliamentary Secretaries would be ministerial in nature and that Parliamentary Secretaries could be considered for future cabinet positions. While the new statutory nature of the position provided a greater degree of credibility and definition to the position, Diefenbaker then exacerbated the ambiguous nature of the position in the Bill's Second Reading debate. In response to a question from an opposition member, the Prime Minister said: "The Honourable Member asked whether the parliamentary secretaries are to be given the status of junior ministers, and without any qualification in this regard I say that they are not."⁸ In essence, Diefenbaker was ensuring that his Parliamentary Secretaries would enjoy the same limbo that the earlier parliamentary assistants had experienced and at the same time, establishing the precedent in which the role of the current Parliamentary Secretary is based. The 1959 Bill also proposed that Parliamentary Secretaries should be appointed for a period of twelve months.

In 1971, the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* was amended by Section 25 of the *Government Organization Act*. Rather than clarifying the role and responsibilities of the Parliamentary Secretary, this legislation authorized that the number of Parliamentary Secretaries holding office at any time was to correspond with the number of ministers receiving salaries under the *Salaries Act*.

While it was war that ushered in the need for Parliamentary Secretaries in the Borden and King governments, one can conclude that it was the majorities of the Diefenbaker and Trudeau governments, which reinforced their need. Diefenbaker, with the largest majority in the history of Canada at the time and Trudeau with the first Liberal majority in eleven years, may have been motivated as much by the need to keep backbenchers busy and disciplined, as they were by the need to provide valuable assistance to over-burdened ministers.

Status

There is only one mention of Parliamentary Secretaries in the Standing Orders of the House of Commons.

A minister of the Crown, or a Parliamentary Secretary acting on behalf of a minister, may, in his or her place in the House, state that he or she proposes to lay upon the Table of the House, any report or other paper dealing with a matter coming within the administrative responsibilities of the government, and, thereupon, the same shall be deemed for all purposes to have been laid before the House.⁹

There have also been two Speaker rulings concerning Parliamentary Secretaries. The first, in 1974, declared that Parliamentary Secretaries did not have the right to ask questions of the government, as they are responsible for answering for the Government. The second, in 1984, specified that Parliamentary Secretaries may make statements on behalf of ministers during House time dedicated to minister's statements.¹⁰

Since the inception of the Conflict of Interest Code in 1994, Parliamentary Secretaries are held to the same ethical standards as Cabinet Ministers.

The clear lack of statutory authority of Parliamentary Secretaries is only equalled by the murky constitutional footing of the office. Early in this Century, Edward VII objected successfully that the Colonial Under-Secretary, Winston Churchill, could not be taken into Cabinet on the grounds that a subordinate should not belong to the same body as his chief. While Edward made it abundantly clear that the British Cabinet was out of reach for the young Winston Churchill, he failed to provide an adequate legal explanation as to why a Parliamentary Secretary cannot sit at the Cabinet table. The constitutional status of the Canadian Parliamentary Secretary is equally ambiguous. Is the position of Parliamentary Secretary part of the Executive? The Ministry? Or are Parliamentary Secretaries simply a manifestation of ministerial responsibility? In 1946, A.D.P. Heeney attempted to define the constitutional status of the Parliamentary Secretary when he declared that King's Parliamentary Assistants were neither Ministers of the Crown, members of the Privy Council, members of a Committee of the Privy Council (Cabinet), nor members of the Ministry.¹¹ Although Heeney described what Parliamentary Secretaries were not, he was unsuccessful in noting what they were.

Parliamentary Secretaries are given the status of *public office holder*, a designation they share with Ministers of the Crown, members of ministerial staff, and full-time Governor in Council appointees.¹² Yet while their status as *public office holder* obliges them to practice the same ethics as their superiors, there is no evidence that this status grants them ministerial powers in Parliament or in the department.

In defining the constitutional status of the Parliamentary Secretary, one must first and foremost keep in mind that Parliamentary Secretaries are not sworn into the Queen's Privy Council and, as such, may not subsequently be sworn into office as a Minister of the Crown and be a part of the Ministry.¹³ In Canada, the Ministry and the Cabinet have usually been considered as the same body. As a result, Parliamentary Secretaries are, in a certain sense, backbenchers who are connected to Cabinet vicariously through the Minister.

Selection

Parliamentary Secretaries are appointed by Order-in-Council to one-year (usually renewed for a second year) terms and are awarded annually an additional \$10,700 to their basic MP salary.

In 1943 Mackenzie King offered the following insights into the selection of Parliamentary Secretaries:

In the appointment of parliamentary under-secretaries it is necessary that responsibility for the appointment must be shared. The Prime Minister himself has to take that responsibility of making the appointment, but it is imperative that he should make it in consultation with the minister who is at the head of the department in connection with the affairs of which the under-secretary will be called upon to serve. I have found, in forming governments, that there is no task in the world more difficult, and in some ways more unpleasant than, having to select some persons as colleagues, and to pass over others, because of considerations of which we must take account in this country in most of the appointments we make, considerations of race, religion, and the like.¹⁴

While selection is technically always the exclusive purview of the Prime Minister, appointments are coordinated by the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Ministers are usually consulted but the selection of Parliamentary Secretaries also serves the interests and objectives of the Prime Minister's Office.

Traditionally, the obvious counterbalance between Minister and Parliamentary Secretary has been religious and linguistic. However, with an increasingly secular society and an unusually regionalized Liberal caucus, this is decreasing in value. Nonetheless, in terms of linguistics, eleven of the twenty-six Parliamentary Secretaries

during the 1st session of the 36th Parliament were maternal speakers of the opposite official language of the Minister. There were also examples where the government effectively deployed bilingual and regional counterbalance. For instance, Eleni Bakopanos, a bilingual allophone speaker from Montreal assisted the unilingual Justice Minister, Anne McLellan, in departmental announcements and ministerial press conferences. In terms of regional counterbalance, the obvious example was Reg Alcock, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Stéphane Dion. Considering that national unity is the primary preoccupation of Minister Dion, a Québécois, it follows logically that a Westerner would be named as his Parliamentary Secretary. With the rise of women in the House, an increasing factor in the selection process is gender. In a House of sixty women (twenty per cent), seven of the twenty-six Parliamentary Secretaries were women (twenty-seven per cent) and seven out of twenty-six are of the opposite gender of the Minister.

However, beyond the considerations to which Mackenzie King referred, the evolution of the Chrétien government presents additional factors which have played a role in the selection of Parliamentary Secretaries. As John Godfrey described: "From my perspective, there have been three rounds of Parliamentary Secretaries. The first round was characterized as the consolation prize to those of the class of '88 who did not make it into cabinet. The second round (those selected between 1995-97) was characterized by new people who did not make it into cabinet. Now, the third round is characterized by those who didn't make it into cabinet and missed the first two rounds. As the Parliament matures it's becoming clearer that there are fewer and fewer places to put people."¹⁵ Godfrey's point of view may lead one to suspect that the office of Parliamentary Secretary is not necessarily being used as a breeding ground of the bright "up and comers," but a convenient instrument to appease those who did not quite make it to cabinet.

Career Prospects

For many, the position of Parliamentary Secretary is a stepping-stone in their parliamentary career. As Diefenbaker suggested, Parliamentary Secretaries should act as apprentices and learn the proverbial ministerial ropes. However, when one considers the trend of the Chrétien government, this does not appear to be the case. Rather than providing a training ground for the next cabinet ministers, the position has become a tool to reward the loyal, silence the rebellious, and to keep the otherwise unoccupied busy.

Many point to the two-year rotational system. Whether Parliamentary Secretaries are outstanding, mediocre, or awful, they are essentially guaranteed the position for two years. In February 1996, all twenty-three Parliamentary Secretaries were removed, given the same form letter from the Prime Minister, and replaced. Consideration was not given to job performance, to acquired portfolio expertise, nor to the working relationship that had been developed between the Parliamentary Secretaries and the Ministers. Accompanying this first major purge of Parliamentary Secretaries, was a PMO press release which stated:

The Prime Minister has adopted the practise of previous governments of completely rotating Parliamentary Secretaries. "We have such an abundance of committed and talented MPs in the Government Caucus that I believe it is important to give as many of them as possible a chance to gain this valuable executive experience," said the Prime Minister.¹⁶

As Table 1 displays, since the inception of the office, it has generally been the rule that Parliamentary Secretaries only serve between one and two and a half years. Yet, despite the evidence that tradition reinforces the practice of the Chrétien government, is this practice necessarily the best policy? In interviews conducted in April and May 1998, former Parliamentary Secretaries alike, offered strong views on the subject.

Table 1
Length of Tenure by Parliamentary Secretaries

Prime Minister	Time Period	No. of P.S. Appointments	Avg. Time
King	1943-1948	20	1.5 yrs.
St. Laurent	1948-1957	28	2.5 yrs.
Diefenbaker	1957-1963	36	1.1 yrs.
Pearson	1963-1968	30	1.5 yrs.
Trudeau	1968-1979	202	1.0 yrs.
Clark	1979-1980	22	0.75 yrs.
Trudeau/Turner	1980-1984	94	1.3 yrs.
Mulroney/Campbell	1984-1993	180	1.5 yrs.
Chrétien	1993-1998 (July)	90	1.5 yrs.

Some concede that everyone ought to be given their turn, others argue that the two-year rotational system is an obvious weakness of the office. Stan Keyes, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport

(1996-98) said: "You've built a relationship with the Minister, respect from the department and expertise in the portfolio. Then suddenly you're unplugged and replaced with someone with no experience. It calls into question the efficiency of government." Maurizio Bevilacqua, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministers of Labour and Human Resources Development (1993-96) noted: "If everybody deserves to have a turn at being Parliamentary Secretary, what does that say about the value of the office?" Meanwhile, Clifford Lincoln, former Parliament Secretary to the Minister of the Environment (1993-96) observed: "If it makes sense for Parliamentary Secretaries to automatically leave after two years, why not for Ministers, the Speaker or Committee Chairs? It is an artificial creation, which makes no sense at all. This is why increasingly, square pegs are found in round holes. In my view, it trivializes the Parliamentary Secretary structure." While it is easy to understand the frustrations of former Parliamentary Secretaries who enjoyed and took pride in their work, Morris Bodnar provided another perspective on the subject. "Initially," he remarked, "it was clear that there were a few Parliamentary Secretaries that didn't belong in that position; after all, with a new government not all the Members were known. The two-year rotation system is an excellent device to allow the Prime Minister to remove Parliamentary Secretaries without offending anyone. Two years is more than enough time to prove yourself and if you have, you'll be taken care of in the future."

There are numerous examples of Parliamentary Secretaries going on to other important positions. Maurizio Bevilacqua became Chair of the Finance Committee; Mary Clancy, who served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration from 1994-96, became Canada's Consul General in Boston; John Harvard, who served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works in 1996, headed the Prime Minister's Task Force on the Western Provinces; Joe Fontana, who served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport from 1993-96, became the National Caucus Chair; and finally, Peter Milliken, who served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Government House Leader from 1993-1996, became the Deputy Speaker.

However, the number of former Parliamentary Secretaries who have made it to Cabinet remains low. Prior to the August 1999 appointments of Elinor Caplan (Minister of Immigration), Maria Minna (Minister for International Co-operation) and Robert Nault (Minister of Indian Affairs), only four others who had served as Parliamentary Secretaries since 1993 had been appointed to Cabinet. While seven appointments is a significantly low number, what remains remarkable is that Prime Minister Chrétien apparently holds a great deal of personal at-

tachment to the apprenticeship nature of the office. In *Chrétien*, the Prime Minister's biographer, Lawrence Martin, describes at length the impact that his stint (1966-67) as Parliamentary Secretary to Mitchell Sharp, then Minister of Finance, had on his career. Martin writes:

Sharp personally requested Chrétien as his parliamentary secretary. He liked the way Chrétien applied himself, with such seriousness and dedication and ambition. These were the qualities Sharp wanted in an apprentice. Under Sharp's wing, Chrétien applied himself with steady devotion. Sharp would never have another student as dedicated and keen, and Chrétien would never have another teacher who looked after him so well.¹⁷

The Pearson government had numerous other star Parliamentary Secretaries who rapidly rose to Cabinet. Prime Minister Trudeau went from being Parliamentary Secretary to Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson in 1965, to Justice Minister in 1967, and finally to Prime Minister in 1968. Prime Minister John Turner rapidly moved from Parliamentary Secretary to Northern Affairs and Natural Resources in 1963 to Minister without Portfolio in 1965. In the Pearson years, fourteen of the thirty (47%) Parliamentary Secretaries were appointed to Cabinet. Since 1993, Chrétien has made only seventeen new Minister of the Crown appointments. Of the seventeen, seven had previously been Parliamentary Secretaries (Van Clief, Mifflin, Macauley, Bradshaw, Caplan, Minna, and Nault), two had been Government Whips (Gagliano and Boudria), two had been Secretaries of State (Christine Stewart and Martin Cauchon), a National Caucus Chair (Jane Stewart), and another, a backbencher (Andy Scott). Uniquely, George Baker had served as a Parliamentary Secretary in the 1970s, but until 1999 had remained a fringe backbencher. Also, in the months leading up to and following the Quebec Referendum of 1995, the Chrétien government parachuted three prominent Quebec figures into cabinet. One came from provincial politics (Robillard), another from the private-sector (Pettigrew), and one arrived from academia (Dion). Low turnover has been endemic in the Chrétien government and considering that Parliamentary Secretaries are not always chosen to be groomed into Ministers, it appears as though Parliamentary Secretaries have stood a fair chance of advancing to Cabinet.

Responsibilities

In describing the responsibilities of Parliamentary Secretaries, Stéphane Dion, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, wrote:

The role of the Parliamentary Secretary is a very valuable one in our parliamentary system. Parliamentary

Secretaries are uniquely placed to provide feedback from Caucus to the Executive and communicate government policy to the Caucus. In addition to liaison with Caucus, my Parliamentary Secretary has provided me with valuable insight into the concerns of their constituents and their region of Canada. Of course, my Parliamentary Secretary also has ongoing responsibilities in the House of Commons, particularly when I am unable to attend Question Period.¹⁸

While much of the Parliamentary Secretary's time is occupied in the House, they also play an important role in committee, in caucus, and are often give extra-parliamentary duties. Yet, in all things concerning Parliamentary Secretaries, the scope of their work is at the discretion of the Minister.

Walther Bagehot has suggested that without the power to sustain or to dismiss the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the House would become merely a debating society.¹⁹ In many ways, Bagehot's words have proven to be prophetic in today's Canadian Parliament. Rather than affecting legislation, House debates generally fulfil a procedural function. Today's ministers are policy-focussed administrators and as a result, debates in the House are secondary to this principal function. While many ministers could be great House orators, in the tradition of Macdonald and Laurier, most are not, principally because they spend very little time in the Chamber. Instead, Parliamentary Secretaries serve the function of moving departmental legislation through the House, while also covering for the Minister in the handling of Opposition Days, Private Members Business, questions on the order paper (written questions) and questions on the adjournment motion (otherwise known as the "late-show").

Although the rewarding nature of these occasionally mundane tasks is debatable, they play an important function. While Ministers are occupied with governing the country, the Parliamentary Secretary takes care of the routine matters of the House. In terms of House duties, Parliamentary Secretaries tend to be as busy as their portfolio dictates. Since Stéphane Dion's portfolio of Inter-governmental Affairs does not have heavy legislative responsibilities, Reg Alcock was not being called upon to deal with legislation. Conversely, Eleni Bakopanos was the busiest in terms of legislative responsibilities during the first session. Not only is this a reflection of the importance of the Justice portfolio, but in her view is due to the priorities of an Official Opposition that was "elected on a 'law and order' platform."²⁰

In dealing with public bills and private members bills at Second and Third Reading, Parliamentary Secretaries work in close co-operation with the Minister's political advisors, the Minister's department, and the Whip's office. Parliamentary Secretaries consult these bodies

while assembling speaking lists for the debate. In many cases, Ministers wish to address their legislation at Second Reading, which will leave the Parliamentary Secretary to speak at Third Reading. It has also occurred that the Minister does not speak to the legislation at all, in which case the Parliamentary Secretary is left to introduce it at Second Reading. Nevertheless, MPs are only permitted to speak to each piece of legislation once. Typically, on the day of the debate, the Parliamentary Secretary receives a prepared speech by electronic mail from the Minister's department. While Parliamentary Secretaries are encouraged to personalize the text, the core of the speech is, in practice, left untouched. Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Secretary also receives talking points and other speeches from the Department for distribution to government members who are on the speaking list.

Although Ministers occasionally attend opposition days, they seldom address Private Members bills and motions. In both cases, Parliamentary Secretaries are responsible for co-ordinating the government's contribution to the debate. Again, speaking lists are created and the department sends the necessary speeches. It is important to note that there is a great deal of pressure to fill the speaking lists; for if a debate collapses, it could lead to a premature vote and the possibility of a lost vote. This can be challenging, as not all government members have an interest in the subject matter or are prepared to speak from the department and Whip's closely guarded script. Of a more routine nature are government responses to written questions and the late show. Written questions are those questions involving a lengthy, detailed or technical response with which the MP gives forty-eight hours notice of his or her intention to ask such a question and whether they request the answer to be given orally. The Parliamentary Secretary routinely submits written answers, prepared by the Department, to the House and the text appears in Hansard. However, should written questions not be answered within a forty-five day limit, they can be dealt with during the late-show (adjournment proceedings). The late-show takes place at 6:30 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, at which time Parliamentary Secretaries will respond to expired written questions or to questions that were not satisfactorily answered during Question Period. As with their contributions in legislative debate, Parliamentary Secretaries will again deliver Department prepared statements.

For many Canadians, the work of their Government amounts to the ten-second sound bites from Question Period observed on the evening news. From the perspective of Parliamentary Secretaries, participation in the show that is Question Period remains a highlight of the

job. Question Period provides Parliamentary Secretaries the opportunity to impress their caucus colleagues and to joust publicly with the opposition. Of further importance however, preparation for Question Period also allows the Parliamentary Secretary access to Cabinet strategy, Ministerial briefs, and departmental tactical meetings. Depending on the access accorded by the Minister, certain Parliamentary Secretaries are encouraged to attend Departmental briefing sessions, given a copy of the Minister's Question Period book, and attend the daily Cabinet Question Period preparation meeting coordinated by the House Leader, Don Boudria.

Not all Parliamentary Secretaries can expect equal participation in Question Period. First and foremost, the opposition dictates the issues to be raised in Question Period. While the questions are often unpredictable, most are of the "headline news" variety. Second, not all Ministers equally attend Question Period. For instance, the portfolios of Foreign Affairs and International Trade require a great deal of international travel, while many high-profile Ministers tend to travel across the country making departmental announcements and attending fundraising events. Third, not all Parliamentary Secretaries will answer questions directed to their portfolio. Most often with sensitive issues, Parliamentary Secretaries will defer to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister or another senior Minister.

The Parliamentary Secretaries to the Prime Minister and to the House Leader never answer questions in Question period.

In 1985, the McGrath Report recommended that the practice of Parliamentary Secretaries sitting on the standing committee for their portfolio be eliminated. McGrath sought to empower the House and Private Members. Since committees were viewed as vehicles of the House and not the Executive, it was deemed unacceptable to have Parliamentary Secretaries sit on committee as "agents" of the Executive.²¹ The Mulroney government accepted this recommendation and for several years Parliamentary Secretaries could only sit on unrelated committees. However, in 1991, holding a slimmer majority and increasingly aggravated that opposition critics could sit on their portfolio committee, the Mulroney government abruptly reverted back to the practice of having Parliamentary Secretaries play a significant role on their portfolio committee. On June 2, 1999, Reformer, Keith Martin, presented a Private-Members motion, M-634, to revert back to the McGrath recommendation.

There remain only sixteen Standing Committees of the House of Commons that are directly related to ministerial portfolio areas. It is on these committees which Parliamentary Secretaries play an important role. In committee, the Parliamentary Secretary acts as the Minister's advocate. Usually, the Parliamentary Secretary will advance the Minister's arguments and absorb the Committee's views. The Parliamentary Secretary then takes these views back to the Minister, who will in turn, respond back to the Committee through the Parliamentary Secretary. Predictably, this challenging function can lead to friction between the Parliamentary Secretary and committee members. Furthermore, Parliamentary Secretaries often act as the acting Whip of the Committee, instructing government Members how to vote on important matters and ensuring that there is always a majority for important votes. In addressing this difficult aspect of the job, Karen Kraft Sloan former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment (1996-1998) advised: "It is very important that colleagues understand the pressure that Parliamentary Secretaries face. It is also important that Parliamentary Secretaries work sensitively and honestly with their colleagues." Regardless, on occasion the unnatural fit of "independent" committees and rigid party discipline in the Canadian system can cause complications. In this session's vigorous C-32, *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* proceedings in the Environment committee, Paddy Torsney found herself in such a situation. *CEPA*, which underwent five years of development, inter-department struggles and heavy industry lobbying, was met in committee with the critical perspectives of opposition members and Liberal environmental advocates Clifford Lincoln, Karen Kraft Sloan, and Charles Caccia, Chair of the Environment Committee. Paddy Torsney and the Committee painstakingly negotiated through a remarkable 560 amendments to the bill.

Although work in the House and in Committee takes up most of the Parliamentary Secretary's time, there are also several "extra-Parliamentary" responsibilities that come with the position. These extra-Parliamentary responsibilities appear to vary more than other tasks among the Parliamentary Secretaries. Some Parliamentary Secretaries are relied upon to be the Ministers advocate and liaison in Caucus. Despite complaints by Parliamentary Secretaries that their position silences them in otherwise free-wheeling Caucus meetings, this advocate and liaison role appears to be important in some cases. An interesting example is the role that Tony Valeri, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance played in the development of the 1999 Budget. It is reported that although he occasionally contradicted Finance Minister, Paul Martin, Valeri was used by Martin

as a “trump card” in intensive closed door deliberations. As a Finance staffer noted: “If Paul didn’t like the way an argument was going, he’d turn to Tony and put him on the spot and say, ‘Well I think caucus thinks this, so what do you think?’”²² Because staffers and bureaucrats are barred from Caucus, Tony Valeri played the role of Caucus authority, if not representative. “Extra-Parliamentary” duties can also call upon Parliamentary Secretaries to do anything from representing the Minister at public events in her or his absence, to meeting with lobbyists and civil leaders.

Beyond the more routine nature of many Parliamentary Secretary responsibilities in the House, the work of Parliamentary Secretaries in Committee and in “extra-Parliamentary” settings appears to offer the position more responsibilities and increased participation in the political debate. Nevertheless, in examining the responsibilities of Parliamentary Secretaries, it remains evident that the position is used primarily as a device of the Executive. Moreover, it is clear that Parliamentary Secretary responsibilities are limited as a means of empowering these “elevated” backbenchers.

The Future of the Position

If one works exclusively on the presumption that the strengths and weaknesses of the position of Parliamentary Secretary are based on the fundamental Minister-Parliamentary Secretary relationship, then there may be very few changes possible. Although some would say, as did John Godfrey that “you cannot legislate a better relationship,” it would seem that more could be done to facilitate a more productive relationship. Peter Adams was quick to note that “the lack of institutional memory must be overcome. Should my Minister and I find the key to the Minister-Parliamentary Secretary relationship, it will be forgotten and lost as soon as my appointment is terminated.”²³ He suggested that new Ministers and new Parliamentary Secretaries attend a formal and frank briefing session with former Parliamentary Secretaries in which expectations, scenarios, and experiences could be shared. While this initiative would undoubtedly be constructive, it may also ask parliamentary colleagues to do the impossible – display vulnerability and confide in each other. A more appropriate approach may be to put the onus on the Minister, the senior partner of the relationship, to embrace the work of their Parliamentary Secretary. Speaking on this theme, Anne McLellan observed: “The Minister must send the message to the political staff and the department that the Parliamentary Secretary is an integral part of the government team and in essence, an extension of the Minister.”²⁴ Without question, the message must also come from the PMO.

When the PMO speaks, MPs, Parliamentary Secretaries, and Ministers listen. Further guidance from this body, would surely strengthen the position of Parliamentary Secretary.

Dissatisfaction that surrounds the current method of appointment and the two-year rotational system must be addressed. Would the position not receive an immediate surge of legitimacy if the two-year rotational system were removed? Despite the PMO’s understandable propensity to avoid unnecessary headaches, it would also be an effective innovation if the PMO undertook a regular review of the work of Parliamentary Secretaries. The Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff, the Minister, and the Parliamentary Secretary could meet annually to discuss the state of the working relationship. Parliamentary Secretaries could be permitted to remain under their Minister for a longer period of time, could be removed anytime if they are not performing or be transferred to another Minister or position.

Interestingly, when asked what changes they would like to see brought to the position, many Parliamentary Secretaries commented that they require more staff for the workload. Evidently, since the time of many Parliamentary Secretaries is at a premium, so is the time of their staffs. The typical MP usually has two Ottawa-based assistants, who provide administrative and legislative assistance. It appears that when Parliamentary Secretary responsibilities are added to the already demanding work of the MP’s office, it can occasionally put incredible stress on the MP’s resources. This seems to be most pronounced in the major portfolio areas of Justice, Health, Finance, Industry, and Foreign Affairs. Indeed, this problem accentuates the fact that, while all Ministers are equal on paper and all Parliamentary Secretaries are in theory also equal, their portfolios are not. Ministerial staffs and departmental staffs vary greatly in size, those of the Parliamentary Secretary do not.

Additional resources for staff would be an important addition to busy Parliamentary Secretaries.

The difficulty of unequal portfolios also calls into question the need of every Minister to have a Parliamentary Secretary and whether some ministerial portfolios could utilize an elevated Junior Minister. As portfolios tend to be inherently ranked in importance, perhaps the government’s Executive offices should be tiered accordingly. While the British Parliamentary Secretary structure is much different, it may provide a guide of how the Canadian Parliamentary Secretary position could be altered.

In Westminster, Ministers of the Crown and Secretaries of State, who share equal power, have the service of not only Parliamentary Secretaries (or Under-Secretaries of State), but Private Parliamentary Secretaries (PPS). British Parliamentary Secretaries assist Ministers, as do Canadian Parliamentary Secretaries, in their parliamentary work, fulfil a liaison role with caucus and the department, and occasionally oversee the development of legislation. Although British Parliamentary Secretaries appear to be responsible for many of the same tasks as their Canadian counterparts, they are looked up on as Junior Ministers and as a result, possess more statutory power and responsibility. Also resembling the Canadian Parliamentary Secretary is the British Private Parliamentary Secretary. The British PPS fulfil a more informal role in the British Executive structure. Generally, they are the youngest of the government MPs, are hand chosen by the Ministers, do not receive extra remuneration, and play an informal role as apprentice and caucus representative. The Private Parliamentary Secretary does not speak on behalf of the Minister in the House and is not viewed as an extension of the Minister.²⁵

Ideally we should adopt a two tier system of Parliamentary Secretaries. The number of first tier Parliamentary Secretaries should be reduced to those Ministers who most need their services and where a Parliamentary Secretary could make a substantial impact on policy development. These Parliamentary Secretaries would optimally have a degree of expertise in the portfolio area, be experienced Parliamentarians, or be bright "up and comers." Consequently, this proposal would also call for the addition of "tier 2" Parliamentary Secretaries to work with all Ministers and Secretaries of State. Like the British Private Parliamentary Secretary, the Canadian "tier 2" Parliamentary Secretary would not be paid, would not speak on behalf of the Minister in the House, and would have an informal relationship with the Minister. This would also provide "tier 2" Parliamentary Secretaries the opportunity to establish relationships with Ministers, learn the ministerial portfolio, and gain a degree of Executive experience. By tiering the Parliamentary Secretary structure, Ministers requiring busy and vital Parliamentary Secretaries would be given Parliamentary Secretaries with increased legitimacy, responsibility, and ultimately capability. Meanwhile, portfolios that are less exigent or involved would be given the service of more appropriate assistance.

Notes

1. See A.R. Kear, *The Parliamentary Secretary in Britain and in Canada* (Queen's University, thesis, 1965), p. 7
2. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1887, 190.
3. See Richard Cartwright, *Reminiscences* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1912) 288, as quoted in W.A. Matheson, *The Prime Minister and the Cabinet* (Toronto: Methuen, 1976) 68.
4. J.E. Glenn, "Parliamentary Assistant: Patronage or Apprenticeship?" *Fleming's Canadian Legislatures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 49.
5. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1943, 2,342.
6. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1943, 2, 344.
7. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1959, 2,187.
8. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1959, 2, 362.
9. House of Commons, *Standing Orders* (Ottawa: The House, 1998), SO 31 (2).
10. Alistair Fraser, W.F. Dawson, and John Holtby, *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules & Forms, 6th Edition* (Toronto: The Carswell Company, 1989), 122.
11. A.D.P. Heeney, "Cabinet Government in Canada: Some recent Developments in the Machinery of the Central Executive" *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, August, 1946, Volume 12, n. 3) 284, 297-8.
12. Office of the Ethics Councillor, *Conflict of Interest Code*. Website: strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/oe00002e.html
13. Peter W. Noonan, *The Crown and Constitutional Law in Canada* (Calgary: Shipnoon Publicaitons, 1998), 152-156.
14. House of Commons, *Debates*, 1943, 2,343.
15. Interview conducted on April 27, 1999.
16. Prime Minister's Office, Press Release, Febraury 23, 1996.
17. Lawrence Martin, *Chrétien, Volume 1* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1995), 167.
18. Hon. Stéphane Dion, *Letter*, April 16, 1999
19. Originally published in 1867. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: C.A. Wats & Co., 1964), 150-182.
20. Interview conducted on May 25, 1999
21. House of Commons, *Report of the Special Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons*, (Ottawa: The House, 1985), 18.
22. Paul Wells, "How the Budget was Born," *The National Post* [Toronto], February 17, 1999, A3.
23. Interview conducted on May 25, 1999.
24. Interview conducted on May 28, 1999.
25. British Cabinet Office, *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* (London: Whitehall, 1992), paragraphs 45-48.