

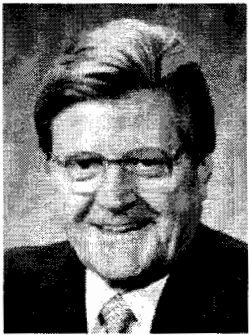
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# The Changing Role of the Private Member in British Columbia

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by Ralph Sultan, MLA

*This article challenges the prevailing notion that backbenchers are “nobodies” whose primary role is to serve as rubber stamps for executive decisions.*



**T**he concept of the mindless backbencher goes back at least to Victorian times. Gilbert and Sullivan summed this up rather well in the operetta *HMS Pinafore*. The chorus goes something like this:

“I always voted at my party’s call  
And I never thought of thinking  
for myself at all!”

In the hundred years since those words were written, have things changed? Some say no. The image of the backbencher acting primarily as a rubber stamp pervades contemporary discussion of parliamentary reform.

For example, Pierrette Venne, a Quebec Member of Parliament, recently identified the “heavy shackles of party discipline” as the root cause of the powerlessness of backbenchers and the current “democratic deficit.” She concluded that “more often than not, MPs are just a kind of “potted palm” decorating the background while the party leaders, ministers and others take the foreground.”<sup>1</sup>

This rather static view of our role in parliament carries over to the local media. When reviewing background materials for my presentation, I was struck forcibly by the media’s image of powerless Private Members, as we are called in British Columbia and other provinces.

In an article entitled “How To Make Backbench MLAs Somebodies”<sup>2</sup>, Victor Godin, a government relations consultant, recalled how Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once sniffed that backbench MPs were nobodies once they were a few feet away from Parliament Hill. Mr. Godin claimed that Mr. Trudeau was in error. The distance – in those pre-metric times should be measured in inches!

Potted palms, inches not feet! Needless to say, I am inclined to disagree!

Before moving to review what has happened in British Columbia, I would like acknowledge the precedents set by other provinces, particularly Alberta and Quebec, in according a larger role for Private Members in the work of their legislative assemblies.

I do not know whether it is merely serendipity – or whether it has something to do with the fact that my BC Liberal Party won 77 out of 79 seats in the last election – but my short career as a parliamentarian has coincided with a series of institutional reforms designed to enhance the role of Private Members in this parliament.

Private Members serve on reactivated all-party legislative committees. For example, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, on which I have served, conducts pre-budget consultations around the province. Government takes their reports seriously. Such committees also have the power to set the annual budgets of the six independent officers of Parliament and to make decisions about contingency funding requests. As another example, Private Members on the all-party Special Committee on the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform have been assigned the task of confirming the selection of the Chair and senior staff of our Citizens’

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Assembly, which may change the way in which MLAs are elected.

*From personal experience, I would say that legislative committees run their own show, which means the Private Members are in charge.*

Secondly, Private Members on the government side are actively involved with policy-making via government caucus committees (GCCs). They chair the five GCCs that review legislation, policies and programs and make recommendations to Cabinet on issues affecting health, education, communities and safety, natural resources, and the economy and government operations. I would say that government programs and legislation that do not pass muster at GCC, seldom make it to the floor of the House. In this respect, therefore, GCCs have become an integral part of the government decision-making process.

As a newcomer I regard such power and influence as typical and normal; those who have been around a long time tell me it is highly unusual. I believe we have borrowed this valuable concept from Alberta. I would also concede that since much of the vigorous debate occurs at the GCC level, this tends to mute vigorous debate from government members in the House, which the Opposition can find perplexing.

Thirdly, in the weekly House schedule, Monday mornings are now dedicated to Private Members' Statements, providing an opportunity to debate Private Members' motions and legislation. We can, and do, stand up and talk about whatever is on our mind.

Fourthly, Private Members now have the opportunity to make two-minute statements immediately prior to every daily Question Period. My colleagues use this opportunity to raise issues important to their constituents and to air their views on current affairs.

Fifthly, Private Members on the government side help shape public policy via caucus task forces. For example, the new 15-member Task Force on Mining, which I chair, has been asked to investigate how to revitalize the mining industry in British Columbia. Our mandate is to gather information, work with the mining industry and recommend possible changes to mining laws, regulations and policies.

Sixthly, Private Members in BC really do engage in free votes, except on matters of confidence. In the recent Spring Sitting, for example, eight colleagues voted against giving prisoners the right to vote provincially. The heavens did not break asunder, and the Whip's wrath was nowhere to be seen! The Government merely pleads for the courtesy of advance notice, and I do not find that burdensome.

Finally, Private Members in BC have benefited from the introduction of the fixed parliamentary calendar (a recent innovation of several other Canadian legislatures too.) The fixed calendar enables us to plan our lives. It recognizes the importance of our role at the constituency level. It allows us to plan timetables and workloads more efficiently. The fixed calendar improves the lot of Private Members by making their lives less random.

When the House is sitting, no business is scheduled for Fridays. One week a month is set aside for constituency work. We also know the date of the next provincial general election (May 17, 2005). By law, we will now have elections every four years. I believe this innovation is without precedent in Commonwealth parliaments.

To conclude, I would like to cite the conclusion of the December 2002 report of the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

Enhancing the role of Private Members is not an end unto itself, but it is rather a means for Private Members to more effectively represent their constituents, to scrutinize legislation, to hold the government to account, and ultimately to vindicate parliamentary democracy.

I would argue that reforms such as the ones I have listed are more than just cosmetic changes designed to pacify a restless caucus. Collectively, these recent institutional reforms in British Columbia are spurring the transformation of backbench MLAs from "nobodies" into "somebodies".

## Notes

1. *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Spring, Volume 26, No. 1, 2003 p. 2.
2. *Vancouver Sun*, June 15, 2003.