
The Impartiality of the Speakership: A Round Table

Speakers Michel Bissonnet (Quebec), George Hickey (Manitoba), Peter Milliken (House of Commons), Bev Harrison (New Brunswick), Kenneth Kowalski (Alberta), and Murray Scott (Nova Scotia)

Confidence in the impartiality of the Speaker is an indispensable condition to the successful operation of the Speakership. Many conventions exist that have as their object to ensure the impartiality of the Speaker; however, these conventions operate differently in various jurisdictions. This topic was the subject of discussion at the Canadian Presiding Officers Conference held in Ottawa in January 2004.



Speaker Michel Bissonnet (Quebec): There are two indispensable conditions for being a good Speaker: independence in dealing with the executive and impartiality in dealing with all elected members.

What does impartiality in Parliament mean? To begin with, Speakers must defend the rights and privileges of all members without exception. They must protect the rights of

the minority by basing their decisions on the fundamental principles of the parliamentary system. Speakers must listen to all members. In our respective legislatures, we are always dealing with political situations. In my opinion, Speakers must be increasingly open to listening to all members and making decisions on the merits of the case, regardless of members' titles. They need to apply the rules firmly with everyone. They need to base their decisions on the rules, jurisprudence and conventions. They must be respectful of the roles of leaders and whips and know how to deal with them.

Presiding officers must also abstain from influencing debates or taking part in discussions in the legislature, and they should remind members regularly that they are there to serve all members and the institution. There are

various means and tools provided by the institution itself to help presiding officers maintain their impartiality.

For about 15 years now, Speakers have been elected through a secret ballot. It started with the House of Commons and then Ontario. In Quebec, we have had two such secret ballots. The third secret ballot election was planned for June 2003. However, since the National Assembly *Standing Orders* had not been amended, consent had to be sought for a secret ballot. On June 3, there was no consent. So I was elected by secret ballot within my own party.

In other words, not all members of the National Assembly were able to vote. Because consent was not granted, the vote was held within my party. The Premier then nominated me on the basis of the result of the vote held within my party. The precise result is unknown, just as is the case with such votes in other legislative assemblies.

There is also the ceremonial aspect, tradition and decorum involved in the Speaker's role. In each legislature, we have the Speaker's parade. The presiding officer is given exceptional prestige. When the Sergeant at Arms announces "Mr. Speaker", everyone in the chamber rises. The Speaker's mace represents authority. So the way Speakers enter the chamber and conduct themselves therein visually emphasizes their impartiality. In the majority of Canadian legislatures, the Speakers wear robes.

In Quebec, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker have not worn robes for the past 35 or 40 years.

There is no desk reserved for the Speaker, which shows that the Speaker does not take part in debates. The Speaker's place is in the chair.

Michel Bissonnet

Speakers have the support of a neutral staff, who are the table officers. I worked for 17 years in the office of the clerk at the City of Montreal. I know how the system works with clerks, who are the most valuable assistants for a Speaker. Behind an effective Speaker lies good cooperation with the table officers.

The Secretary General of the National Assembly and his team provide extraordinary support to any Speaker. That always enhances the impartiality of the presiding officer's work.

How can a Speaker remain an active elected member and maintain his or her impartiality? In London, the situation is clear. As soon as Speakers are elected, they break all ties with their political party.

In Canada, according to Beauchesne, in order to guarantee absolute impartiality, the convention is that Speakers renounce all official ties with their party. They do not take part in party meetings or in any partisan political activities.

In Quebec, Speakers never attend caucus meetings of their party. Speakers do not attend partisan meetings, party conventions or general councils. They are impartial. I was Deputy Speaker for nine years: four and a half years with the Liberal government and four and a half years as Deputy Speaker from the opposition.

So, like my fellow Deputy Speakers, I respected the obligation of discretion that my duties imposed. The Deputy Speakers must be discreet, but they do attend caucus meetings. They are involved in partisan politics and do fundraising activities. In Quebec we are very strict in that respect.

Since I am the Speaker of the National Assembly, I have to be impartial. I wonder whether I will be able to contribute to my political party financially. I am not at that point yet. This issue of impartiality is something that touches me deeply. It is difficult.

We need to avoid taking part in events attended by officials from our party. For example, if a government minister makes an announcement in my riding, I will not attend because the event centres on a government official, in this case, a minister. It is very strict.

My riding holds fundraising campaigns. Members lend a great deal of support to fundraising campaigns. People need to be called on the phone and members have to do that work. Since my election as Speaker I have kept away from membership activities and fundraising campaigns. My supporters will be involved in the fundraising campaign but I will not be able to attend. It is a situation that is difficult to explain to constituents.

When I was elected Speaker, I met with my riding association executive and told them that from then on I had to be impartial and that I had a duty to ensure that there would be no more partisan politics of any kind in my riding office. A supporter who had been helping me for a long time told me one day that he thought I was no longer a Liberal or at least less so than he had thought. I have not changed, but my role has changed. As Speaker, I must avoid speaking out on national issues, especially if they are controversial. I receive 200 e-mails a week at the National Assembly. When any citizen sends you an e-mail, you have to answer it. There is nothing worse than receiving an e-mail from someone and not answering. The person will send you the same e-mail the week after. The Speaker must answer but always in an impartial way. Information has to be provided diplomatically. A question deserves an answer, and the answer must be impartial. You cannot give an opinion unless it is on a very local issue. For example, our former Speaker, Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, who represented the riding of Borduas, advocated publicly for a commuter train from Saint-Hilaire in his riding to Montreal. So there is no problem if the issue is a local one.

That said, it is vital for our constituents that we act as an intermediary with the government administration. People make requests at the provincial level. Some 80 per cent of the day-to-day problems involving workmen's compensation, workplace accidents, the pension system, car insurance, health and education have to go through the MNA's office, since they are under provincial jurisdiction. Speakers are elected members and have to look after their voters' interests. They need to help people get their problems dealt with properly. Presiding officers cannot act on behalf of a member for another riding. People who know us well often ask us to work on issues for family members living in other ridings. If we agree to represent someone who does not live in our riding, then we cannot act as Speaker of the National Assembly. As Speaker, we can play that role in our own riding but not for other ridings. We have to be careful about that. We also need our representations to be dealt with effectively by ministers, given the limited action we can take as Speaker.

In conclusion, presiding officers must be extremely careful in what they do. We must always act with dignity and in a non-partisan manner in order to preserve the office's impartiality and credibility with all colleagues.



Speaker George Hickes (Manitoba): I believe that the concept of neutrality is a very important issue that has a significant impact on the perceptions of how the office of the Speaker is viewed by other parliamentarians, colleagues and the public. Neutrality is important because it lets members know that the Speaker is not acting in a biased manner and that the Speaker is there for all members, whatever

their political stripe, and that all members can feel confident in knowing that each and every one of them will be treated the same. In that fashion, I try to treat each and every member the same, whether New Democrat, Conservative, Liberal, backbencher, opposition or the premier. I have gone out of my way to do that.

I am the first Speaker in Manitoba to be elected by a secret ballot. In 1999 there were four candidates. I was re-elected in June 2003 when two of us ran for Speaker. We have 57 members so to be elected Speaker one needs a majority of 50 per cent plus 1 or 29.

I do not know about other provinces, but I know that in the two elections that we have had for Speaker, the premier did not get involved. The premier stayed out of it and made it very clear that he would not be endorsing any candidate. He, like all of the other 57 members, would have one vote and that would be it. As far as I know, that occurred.

In the past, our Speakers were always appointed by the premier. They were not elected by the members. The premier of the day would appoint whomever they chose to be the Speaker.

I am sure that it created some problems in that the perception was that the Speaker was the agent of the government. I am sure some members would perceive it as an extension of the existing government of the day. Whether that was true or not, I do not know, but I am sure many people thought that way.

Prior to 1999, there was no consistent practice regarding the actions of the Speaker outside the House.

During legislative sessions it was clearly understood that Speakers would not attend caucus meetings. However, outside sessions of the legislature, participation by the Speaker in party or caucus functions would vary. Some chose to attend caucus meetings as well as party retreats or party fundraising events. Other Speakers chose not to do that. There were no guidelines.

Since I am the first Speaker to be elected by secret ballot in Manitoba, I truly believe it is important that I behave in a manner that demonstrates the neutrality of the Speaker's office. I believe my actions will set the standard for future Speakers of the legislature. Therefore, I choose not to attend caucus meetings, caucus retreats or political party events.

If the government is handing out a cheque in my constituency, I will not attend. I have had cheques from the government pass through my office, which I have returned. I have said that I would not be handing out any government cheques on behalf of the government or attend any fundraisers on behalf of my party.

I do not attend events or ceremonies in my constituency on behalf of the government, even if a government minister will be attending.

George Hickes

One's profile is raised in the province when you become the Speaker of the legislature. You have more exposure to the media. There is more recognition from the public as Speaker than there would be if I were simply a member of the opposition.

I was requested to do some campaigning for my party outside my constituency. I said that I would not do it because I was still the Speaker until the election was held on June 3, 2003. I campaigned in my own constituency, of course, but everybody else stayed out. The premier did not come into my constituency and no other elected official did any campaigning for me in my riding.

I attend events in my own constituency to which I am invited by my constituents. However, I do so in my capacity as MLA for the riding. I do not attend as Speaker of the legislative assembly. I have never worn my official robes in any capacity in my constituency because I am there as their MLA, not as the Speaker.

When I speak publicly, I make it clear that I am not a representative of the governing party. When I am asked to speak as the Speaker, I make it clear that I am speaking on behalf of all 57 members of the legislature.

I strongly believe that it is important that my actions reflect my beliefs in this area. Therefore, I go out of my way to ensure that I am not engaging in acts that could be viewed as being politically biased. I will not deny that, at times, this can be very hard. It means that I do not get to spend much time in the company of other members who have been my caucus colleagues.

I have developed some good and close friendships over the years. It can be quite a transition to go from attending caucus to not attending it. I attended the caucus for nine years, during which time I was also the party whip. We all know the role of whip. There is a significant amount of interaction among colleagues, as a result of which some close relationships are developed. Also, as whip, you work with the other side very closely because you have to make agreements for pairing and everything else. Thus, you develop friendships with those who are members of the other parties.

As Speaker, I feel very isolated at times. Many of the members do not want to be seen coming out of the Speaker's office. It is almost like the old days when you were called to the principal's office. It is sad that members feel that way, but some do. I am not their boss; the rules are their boss. The rules govern the members; I do not govern them. I enforce the rules that govern each and every member of the House. I do not write the rules. The clerks are the real interpreters of the rules. I am there to follow the directions they give me. Any Speaker who does not follow the advice of their clerk is a fool.

I am often asked how being Speaker adversely affects how I represent my constituents. People say, "When you are the Speaker, you cannot raise issues in the House. You cannot engage in partisan attacks over issues." If I were a member of the legislatures of either the Northwest Territories or Nunavut, I would have a different answer.

I have been an elected member since 1990. Obviously, I am a member of a political party. The political party to which I belong now forms the Government of the Province of Manitoba. If there were ever anything negative or a controversial issue pertaining to the party to which I belong, there is no way I would raise it in the House. Why would I embarrass the party to which I belong? If there are issues to raise, I would rather do it by sitting down with a minister or the premier, instead of trying to do it in public to embarrass them.

As Speaker, I am a huge asset for my constituents. I have good access to the minister and the premier because of my role as Speaker. They know that I am limited in terms of raising issues and making public appearances on behalf of the party. If I need assistance with an issue raised by a constituent and I need to consult a minister or the premier about it, their door is automatically opened

to me. I do not know about the rest of you, but I am sure it works that way pretty well in every province and territory because of our unique roles and our limitations.

When I or my assistant phones a minister's office on an issue, they react right away. They try to solve it as quickly as possible.

So, does it hinder my role as a representative of the constituency? I do not believe it does. I have not felt it. I have not seen it, and I do not know how it could impact negatively. In my view, many more doors are open to me as the Speaker than would have been if I were not the Speaker. I am not belittling anyone, but I know that even with some of the issues that have come up where I have had to speak to the Lieutenant Governor, he will phone right away. We work very closely together on different ceremonies and issues and have developed a friendship. We have gotten to know each other a little better on a personal basis.

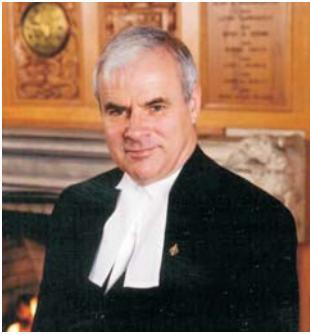
I have found that there has been a very positive response from my constituents because I am the Speaker. My role in the House is a lot more visible now than it has been in the past. Quite a number of constituents that I have spoken to — especially during our last election campaign in June 2003 when I was campaigning door to door — have made a statement. There are nine seniors' blocks in my constituency, and a lot of these comments came from the seniors, but a lot from the other doors. They were very honoured and proud that their MLA was the Speaker of the House.

Being Speaker has helped me in a lot of different ways. People have said to me, right to my face, "I did not vote for you last time, but I am voting for you because you are the Speaker." I do not know the situation in the other provinces and territories, but that is how it was for me.

The proof of that was that in 1999 I won with 56 per cent of the vote, and this time around, in 2003, I had 76 per cent of the vote. It increased 20 per cent, and a lot of it was because I was the Speaker. I know that. A lot of people liked it because I was not into partisan politics. Whatever the reason, I think it is important that I conduct myself in an impartial fashion.

On balance, I believe that the drawbacks of neutrality of the speakership, such as isolation, are far outweighed by benefits such as higher visibility, better access to ministers and the continued development of the role of the Speaker as neutral and independent. It is for this reason that I will continue to abstain from involvement in any activities as a member that could cause the office of the Speaker to be viewed as partisan. That works for me.

These are my own views. I am sure the next Speaker of Manitoba will do what is right for him or her.



Speaker Peter Milliken (House of Commons): What others have said is in line with my own experience, except perhaps for certain details that I will explain. For example, there is a major issue with respect to fundraising campaigns.

I raise money between elections, and were I an independent member, I could not do so. I would be unable

to issue receipts under the *Canada Elections Act* to those who make financial donations, because the funds must be channeled to a registered political party. Therefore, I maintain my party affiliation in order to be able to issue receipts for financial donations to the Liberal Party in Kingston, since I am a member of that party. That money might be used during my election campaign, though in fact I hope to raise enough funds during the campaign to make that unnecessary. For that reason, then, I am unwilling to relinquish party affiliation. Incidentally, my two predecessors also followed the same practice.

Second, I do attend party events in my constituency. I am still an ex-officio member of the Kingston and the Islands Liberal executive, and I occasionally attend their meetings. I also attend party gatherings in Kingston, such as barbecues or receptions for visiting ministers, but never if they take place outside the constituency. I cannot remember if I ever appeared with a minister in making an announcement in my constituency in Kingston, but the announcements usually take place when I am not available because I am much more tied to Ottawa than before; certainly I have not attended a cheque presentation for a long time.

When events are held in a neighbouring riding or elsewhere in the country, I do not attend them; the same is true for party conventions and caucus meetings. The exception is at Christmas, when I am invited, and attend the Christmas parties held by each of the five political parties in the House.

I had a chat with John Fraser, the first elected Speaker of the House of Commons. He described how he ran in his constituency as the Speaker in the 1988 general election and campaigned as such, avoiding attacks on other parties. Certainly when I attend partisan meetings in Kingston, I do not make speeches denouncing the other parties, or in fact talk about politics. I speak about my work as Speaker and the city of Kingston, but I avoid discussing partisan politics. I have gotten out of the habit of talking that way, much as I used to enjoy it, and I believe

that is appropriate. I think people, and in particular local people in the other parties, appreciate it. It seems to help people recognize that I operate as a neutral officer in the House, unlike other members with more partisan functions.

The question is often asked about how a Speaker can properly represent his or her constituents. The truth is that ministers always make themselves available to me, and that I can easily contact them should the need arise.

Peter Milliken

About three times a year, I organize receptions for MPs in various parts of Canada, where I ask six or seven Members from the region to invite 50 people to join us for an informal gathering. There I address the group and explain the responsibilities of MPs and ministers in the House and in the various committees.

I then introduce each of the MPs in attendance and explain the individual duties and responsibilities they carry out as members of various parliamentary committees. These receptions with MPs are quite popular, and offer me an excellent opportunity to explain what MPs do to a large number of people in a given region. Often MPs will invite their campaign workers, and I believe it is equally important for them to understand an MP's duties and responsibilities. It is also a chance for the Members' guests to meet people, since there are usually representatives from other parties at these receptions as well.

In Calgary, for example, I think there were five members of the Alliance and one Conservative member; this was before the amalgamation of the two parties. I do not think there were any Liberal members of Parliament in Calgary. Different places mean different configurations of Members and political parties.

Another thing that has been helpful for my work in the House is a dinner that I host twice a month when the House is sitting, where I invite about 20 Members. I draft a seating plan so that they are not seated according to party, but rather blended. In this way, they end up meeting each other and talking on a purely social level. There is no agenda, it is simply sitting down, chatting and having a meal together. Often, when they attend receptions given by other people, Members do not mix and mingle, except with those of their own party. This is a chance for them to get to know one another. Now, as a result of these dinners many cross-party friendships have formed. In my view, it has led to a little less tension in the House be-

cause people are not so nasty to one another when they get to know each other. I find that very helpful, and the dinners have become quite popular. Members ask, "When is your next dinner? I want to come again." It's been an effective method of bringing Members together that has not cost a fortune.



Speaker Bev Harrison (New Brunswick): I would like to begin by saying that I support impartiality but in a different way. I try to remain impartial in the House. When Speakers make rulings that are not in members' favour, which often happens as we all know, they are growled at by all and experience disapproving looks at the time or comments after the fact.

Speakers are certainly not popular at such times. The Speaker's job is the toughest. Unless his or her colleagues are educated in the principles behind the position, which most are not, then it will continue to be a tough job.

Many Speakers have gone out of their way to disassociate themselves from their party. To do that in New Brunswick would not result in anything but the demise of the Speaker. Thus, I have to cleverly decide how I will remain impartial but yet stick to the fact that I was elected as a PC member and that I must eventually return to the polls and run a campaign as a PC member. I must always be conscious of that fact. I have a tough enough time explaining to people in the riding who wonder who their representative is now that I am the Speaker. I have to take the time to let them know what I do and how I may do some things better as the Speaker. There are others who take some pride in having the Speaker as their member. In the end, I have to compensate for my inability to speak or address an issue by attending every single function in the riding, from birthdays to anniversaries. As a result, I do not take weekends off because Saturday and Sunday are my two busiest days of the week. I am never at home because I attend all functions. If I were not to attend, I would have no profile, other than to be seen on television sitting in the chair and never giving a speech or casting a vote. Therefore, I have to do those things.

Yes, I do attend party functions and fundraisers. I also belong to the regional southern New Brunswick PC cau-

cus and attend all of the functions in those ridings. I attend where cheque presentations are involved.

I do not spend time damning the opposition because I do not find it necessary. However, I do speak on issues in the riding. For example, when the doctors went on strike in New Brunswick, I had myself invited to each senior's group in the riding and went on a speaking tour to tell the other side of the story. I had no problem doing that. It had nothing to do with the opposition party because it was strictly an issue of what the doctors wanted and what the government expected.

I speak to schools in other ridings, as well as in my own riding, in a more academic context on the role of the Speaker in Parliament and on government in general.

Bev Harrison

In New Brunswick, there is not much choice, although I have that choice and have made it to attend caucus when the House does not sit. When the House is sitting, I do not attend caucus. That was a personal choice. Previous Speakers may not have attended caucus at any time. It is for the Speaker to decide.

Someone mentioned that members do not want to be seen coming out of the Speaker's office. I invite members from both sides to come to my office for a chat because I think it is a healthy thing to do. It is a good way to touch base and to sustain some respect among members on both sides. I work hard on cooperation, which is important to me, even though the Speaker may not always achieve the desired cooperation of the government side.

I am interested in the issues of helping the Speaker. Yes, the Speakers are supposed to get help with the job because they are out there on their own; and that is what you are told and that is what is supposed to happen, although I do not see that happening much in New Brunswick. I fight it out like any other member. I have an executive assistant who has to do whatever it takes to get anything for the riding.

I have tremendous respect from the civil service. When I leave a phone message, I receive a call back from a deputy minister very quickly. From that perspective, the Speaker gets respect.

I will conclude by saying that there is another side to the issue from a New Brunswick point of view. The only difference is that I have to learn to walk a tightrope because I must have some involvement in the party while maintaining neutrality. I think I have done that to the

point where at least respect from the government and the opposition is still evident.



Speaker Ken Kowalski (Alberta): As a group I think we have a pretty good understanding of who we are and the roles that we play. The key point is that we are the servants of the Houses but we are not their slaves. We must exhibit firmness, fairness and respect, and we must follow the traditions of impartiality and dignity that are inherent to the job, which is how we survive.

I will mention a couple of little nuances in that respect. The choice of attending a caucus meeting in the Province of Alberta is one that the Speaker would make as an individual. When the legislature sits, I do not attend. Outside of the legislature, I then take it as a choice.

I have run in seven elections and will run again to make it eight. I am elected with a political party. I attend partisan events in and out of my riding. I made it clear to the leaders of the opposition parties in Alberta that if I were to be invited to a meeting of an opposition party, I would probably accept.

I have told both opposition leaders that if they were to extend an invitation to me to attend their caucus meetings, I would go. I have in the past. The leader of the official opposition party asked me to attend, and I went. I only stayed for the official House issues, but it really did take down the door of defence.

No minister would ever come to my constituency without my permission. We have a tradition in the government caucus in Alberta that no minister would dare show up in any member's riding without having the permission of that member. It provides for great teamwork.

When I was a minister of the Crown, we insisted on that practice. When a minister comes to my riding, I introduce the minister. I make it clear that I am the MLA but am also the Speaker and that the minister is there to do certain things.

I very much enjoy retail politics. I do present cheques — many of them. That is a fine way to be in touch with constituents. I also go to anniversaries, school events and funerals. I extend cards at funerals. That is a form of retail politics as well. I am very much involved in local party activities and have been all my life.

However, there is one set of events that I will not go to as a Speaker. I will not go to the premier's or the leader's dinners. I will participate in policy conferences and party conventions. I will attend, but I will play a low-key role. I will not have a high profile in that respect.

In my 25 years in political life, I have never mentioned an opponent in any speech. I engage in discussion, highlighting the message I want to impart. Why would I want to denigrate anyone else? That practice allows me to get away from partisan arguments.

I do not have to criticize an opponent. My job is to sell the message I want to sell. I will never be criticized for attacking another political party or another person. My philosophy is that I do not mention opponents. Why would you want to do that?

The vast majority of my constituents are proud that I am the Speaker. That surprised me. I am a former deputy premier and a former minister of a number of portfolios in Alberta. When I became Speaker, my constituents somehow thought that was even better than all the rest. I was quite shocked by that for a while.

In retail politics, you sell the fact that being the Speaker is a good thing. It is above the melee. It provides dignity. Yes, doors are open to Speakers.

Ken Kowalski

In Alberta, 74 of the 83 members belong to the majority party. The most difficult group to deal with is the government, the majority party, because the expectation is that you are still theirs. They still own you. You are still a member. You fought the wars. For the most part, though, they are very good about that.

My door is always open. Any door I have ever had in any office has always been open. There are MLAs and ministers in and out all the time, which we encourage.

My open-door policy goes even further. I hold a series of private dinners. I invite representatives from all three parties to attend, usually in groups of eight. Eleven dinners are held every spring either in the Speaker's suite or in another room. There is no agenda. Everyone sits and has a good dinner for an hour and a half to two hours, which breaks down some of the barriers.

I found that the most difficult sell in the past was getting the leaders of the various opposition parties, along with the premier, in one room. There would only be four of us there. Depending on what is happening in the spring, one of the three may decide that they are so mad at the other two that they would not come to the dinner. We did not have a dinner last year for the three of them,

but they have come in the past. Those dinners have worked quite well. For the most part, we have evolved.

A key good development is the House of Commons having a secret election of the Speaker. As that practice is extended throughout the country, it provides for greater independence.

After the 1993 election in the Province of Alberta, the premier and I had great affinity and love for one another. Eighteen months later, we had a dramatic falling-out, which made for great media publicity. I wandered through the deserts for three years.

I was not the anointed one in 1997. It was very clear that the Premier of Alberta did not want me to be the Speaker, but I won. That really established a dramatic independence for the role of the Speaker.

I was elected Speaker again in 2001. There was no opposition at all to my being Speaker. It cemented a good establishment. The Speaker must be a servant, not a slave.



Speaker Murray Scott (Nova Scotia): When I came to the Speaker's office, I had only been an MLA for about 15 months. I had hardly gotten to know where my chair was, let alone the rules of the House or much more about the workings of the assembly. It was a bit overwhelming. Coming from a previous career as a police officer where everything was set in stone, with some discretion,

I found that there were not a lot of things that would help me a great deal. However, one thing we all have as a common denominator is those working in the clerk's office. Thanks to the experience of those people and by following their advice, I have always found my way through the dark. As the Speakers come and go, those in the clerk's office usually remain, and I know that their advice and experience are well regarded.

One of the first meetings I attended after becoming Speaker was a session like this. I remember having a discussion one night with one of the Speakers from another part of the country. We were comparing what he did in his area with what I was doing in my area. What I did not realize before that conversation, is that each one of us as Speakers and presiding officers will develop our own style. What may work in one area will not necessarily work in another jurisdiction.

As much as I love being Speaker and as much as I enjoy the job, if I am not the MLA for Cumberland South, there is not much chance of me being Speaker for the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. I always put my constituency first outside the legislature and try to keep that impartiality inside the legislature.

Murray Scott

I remember when there were some cuts in our area, much as there has been across this country, in health care. My riding includes many seniors and disabled persons. Health care is an issue. My government, my party at the time, was in the process of making budget cuts. My own community faced the possibility that our hospital would not only be downsized but could even face closure. The opposition in my area — not the party's opposition but my own opposition people in my own constituency — took advantage of me being Speaker to drag me into that controversy. There were several meetings, and ministers came into town. I remember one night at the local arena when the place was full. They ensured that they got me on stage so that I would have to face the constituents who elected me and make a decision in front of them on whether I would be the Speaker and say nothing or whether I would be the MLA for Cumberland South and do what I could.

There were several thousand names on a petition. I was introduced as the Speaker. The person in charge had actually placed the petition at the podium. I was the last one at the mike, and she presented me with this petition to present to Halifax. I said that I was the MLA for Cumberland South, that I was elected by these people and that I was an MLA first. I signed that petition in front of all those people as the MLA for that area and personally delivered it the next morning to the premier on behalf of the constituents.

I have heard today that some Speakers attend meetings and some do not. Some attend caucus and some do not. Some take part in partisan politics and some do not. I think you have to decide what is best for you and your riding. If you have the support of the other members of the parties in your area, then you know that that is working well for you.

I want to make two points about how I judge the results in my own area after five years as Speaker.

First, in the last election, our majority government was reduced to a minority government. After being Speaker for four years, I was able to return as the MLA for Cumberland South with the largest majority in Nova Scotia, which was a complete reversal from previous elections because another party represented that area.

Second, when we came back in a minority situation, the opposition had the opportunity to place one of their own in the Speaker's chair. I was not nominated for the position by the premier. The motion was seconded by the

leader of the official opposition. The leader of the third party also supported it. No one ran against me.

My points are these. We develop our own style. We find out what works best for us. We ensure that the office of Speaker is not used for advantage and that it is impartial. The bottom line is that we are the MLAs who represent the people in our own areas. To find the balance on that fine line is very important. What may work in one area may not necessarily work in another.