
The British Columbia Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy

by Karen Aitken

In the third week of April 2004, fifteen teachers and five teacher facilitators from across B.C. gathered in Victoria to participate in the British Columbia Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy. These teachers, selected by a committee of their peers, came to the Parliament Buildings to experience first-hand the workings of our parliamentary system and enhance their knowledge of B.C.'s political system. This article looks at the development of this program and its inaugural meeting.

Launched in spring of 2004, the B.C. Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy is an opportunity for teachers of social studies and related courses from across British Columbia to come to the Parliament Buildings to experience the inner workings of parliamentary democracy, share insights and expertise with their colleagues and learn about and exchange new classroom activities in this essential subject.

The Library of Parliament has been offering a national institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy since 1996. In Saskatchewan, the Legislative Assembly, through the Speaker's Office, has recently offered its' third institute to the teachers of their province. Following upon the success of both the national and provincial programs, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, Public Education and Outreach, launched a B.C. Institute this year.

Although there are numerous opportunities for youth in British Columbia to become aware of and involved in our parliamentary system, such as field trips to the Parliament Buildings and the various youth parliaments, there is no such opportunity for the teachers of British Columbia. Until recently with the launch of the Legisla-

tive Assembly of British Columbia's "Discover Your Legislature" CD-Rom, B.C. teachers have had to rely upon federal resources to teach this fundamental topic on Parliament. However, teachers also need more than resources, they need to personally understand our parliamentary system in order to effectively teach it to their students in a creative and captivating way

Applications for the B.C. Teachers' Institute were widely distributed in the fall and early in January 2004. Applications were included with registration packages at two fall conferences: the B.C. Social Studies Teachers' Association (BCSSTA) and the Provincial Intermediate Teachers' Association (PITA). Applications were also available online at the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia with links also available on the B.C. Teachers' Federation Professional Development Calendar and the B.C. Social Studies Teachers' Association websites. An announcement and advertisement were also printed in *Dimensions*, the quarterly Social Studies newsletter for B.C. teachers and *Landscapes*, a quarterly newsletter of FORED BC. Furthermore, a letter with accompanying poster, brochure and application form were electronically mailed to all principals across British Columbia. The deadline for application was January 23, 2004.

At that time, all applications were reviewed by the Selection Committee. The committee was made up of one volunteer from the executive of each of the following organizations: the British Columbia Social Studies Teachers' Association, the Provincial Intermediate

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Teachers at the farewell banquet at Government House with Her Honour, The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia

Teachers' Association and the British Columbia Primary Teachers' Association. The criteria for selection were provided to the committee together with an evaluation form to rank candidates based upon their professional development, curriculum planning and shared professional expertise along with a letter of recommendation and resume as supporting documentation¹. The successful candidates were chosen from across British Columbia representing both public and independent schools² as well as urban and rural communities³. They were notified in early March and letters of recognition were sent to the candidates' local school district Superintendent. A small registration fee⁴ was required and successful candidates were responsible for their own substitute teaching costs.

The overall objective of the intensive three and one-half day Teachers' Institute was to provide teachers with a professional development experience that would promote a greater understanding of B.C.'s parliamentary system. Their hands-on experience was to stimulate them to implement and share innovative classroom activities with their colleagues in their schools and communities. Indeed, it was a requirement of all participating teachers to provide workshops and share their resources upon their return. Numerous participants have written articles to their local newspapers and for upcoming teacher newsletter and magazine publications. At the annual B.C. Social Studies Teachers' Association conference in October, several participants will be hosting a workshop on the success of the inaugural B.C. Teachers' Institute.

Additional objectives of the Institute were to enhance their knowledge and understanding of B.C.'s political system and promote discussion and critical inquiry into key issues in parliamentary democracy. The Institute was to facilitate the sharing and development of ideas, resources and teaching methods about parliamentary democracy in relation to B.C.'s social studies' curriculum. By motivating teachers to be champions of effective citizenship, the Institute extended the discussion of parliamentary democracy with their students, schools and communities. The idea is to foster a network of ambassadors who will be able to assist their colleagues at the school and board level in developing and implementing new strategies to teach parliamentary democracy and civic education. To assist in this regard, the teachers were supplied with two resource boxes filled with teaching materials on parliamentary democracy; legislatures, elections and history from across Canada and British Columbia to further enhance their teaching.

Teachers need to have innovative teaching strategies and classroom activities that are simple to use and that inspire students to learn more about the institution of Parliament. At the B.C.'s Teachers' Institute, the fifteen teachers were formed into three groups to develop a classroom activity to be shared with teachers across the province. Activities developed by teachers for teachers based on their personal experience will assist them to share their new knowledge of our complex system of parliamentary democracy. The three groups were determined based on the grade level of teaching that the teachers were presently employed within.⁵ Each group had one facilitator, a B.C. teacher who had previously participated in the national Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy.

The facilitators acted as the first point of contact for questions, encouraged discussion amongst the groups and kept them focussed on their classroom activities. Their goals were to monitor, debrief and troubleshoot as well as assist with curriculum connections, instructional design and access to resources. Facilitators were drawn from the advisory group and were most enthusiastic about their involvement with B.C.'s first Teachers' Institute. The facilitators were provided with a modest honorarium⁶ and had their substitute teaching costs covered, where applicable. The facilitators arrived one day early to meet as a committee prior to the commencement of the Institute. There were also regular debriefing/ updating meetings over breakfast each morning and a final wrap-up meeting on Saturday afternoon.

An extra member from the advisory group took on the role of observer and is in the midst of finalizing his report on the Institute. Although not a completely independent



Official photo of The Honourable Claude Richmond, Speaker of the House, and the teachers in front of the B.C. Parliament Buildings

observer, his comments will assist in the planning and improvement of the Institute in following years.

The three groups met on a regular basis throughout the week in teamwork sessions that were scheduled within the ambitious agenda. Each session lasted approximately 1 to 2 hours and provided the teachers with an opportunity to reflect on the day's activities and ask questions. It was a guaranteed time each day to share information and work on the development of a group classroom activity. During these teamwork sessions, the groups had access to a computer, internet and printer as well as Legislative Assembly research staff to assist them in locating the information they needed to develop their activities in a timely manner. In one of the groups of five teachers, they decided to break into three smaller subsets and hence at the end of the Institute, there were two additional classroom activities presented.

The networking among the teachers from all over British Columbia [from Prince George to Kamloops to Vancouver and Parksville] was also an important dimension to the learning experience. The teachers commented on the excellent opportunity that the hospitality suite offered each evening in terms of debriefing on the days' activities and sharing professional opinions and discussions with their colleagues from across B.C. In a full day of classroom teaching, it is rare that teachers are able to communicate with their fellow colleagues in their own school setting, let alone with others in their school district. It was a welcome addition to the busy program to unwind and recount the events of the day together with fellow teachers from around the province.

Introducing the teachers to the various public education resources and supports available through the Legislative Assembly's Office of Public Education and Outreach was also an important result of the Institute. As a result of the Institute, the Office of Public Education and Outreach has designed, with the input of participating Institute teachers, a poster for students highlighting the Parliament Buildings and the history of British Columbia together with classroom activities on the back. This new poster will be distributed to all schools in British Columbia in the fall of 2004.

The true substance of this professional development opportunity was the intensive agenda of presentations activities. There were formal presentations from the Claude Richmond, Speaker of the House, on his role as both an elected official and non-partisan Speaker, and E. George MacMinn, QC, Clerk of the House, on the history and traditions of parliamentary democracy. Other senior parliamentary officers offered lectures on A Day in the House, and How a Bill Becomes Law. Information and discussion sessions were also held with Hon. Mr. Justice Malcolm D. Macaulay, Supreme Court Judge, on the role of the Judicial Branch of government and Herb LeRoy, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, on the role of the Lieutenant-Governor in a constitutional monarchy. Professor Ronald I. Cheffins, QC, was a wonderful addition to the end of the Institute and summarized the presentations on the three branches of government and challenged the teachers' learning. A media panel discussion on the role of various forms of media coverage on British Columbia politics proved to be both insightful and entertaining. A highlight for

many of the teachers was attending Question Period. Although they can and do watch Question Period from their classrooms, the excitement and passion is far more persuading when observing from the public gallery.

The informal dinner with Members of the Legislative Assembly was another highlight of the program. Most of the teachers were able to meet directly with their own MLA and the dinner provided for an excellent opportunity to mix and mingle with over fifty MLAs present. The Speaker welcomed everyone to the event and introduced Premier Gordon Campbell who addressed the crowd with words of congratulations to the teachers for their commitment and dedication to the education of British Columbia's children. Meeting with the MLAs, talking and questioning them about their experiences as elected officials, and generally becoming acquainted with the names and faces they hear and read about on a political level was a tremendous learning opportunity.

Interaction between the participants and the presenters, parliamentary staff and Members of the Legislative Assembly was a vital aspect of the program. The teachers rated the access to key individuals who are both committed and passionate about the work they do as a significant feature of the Institute. Meeting directly with the various staff of the Legislative Assembly, such as Hansard and the Library, contributed to their understanding of the whole democratic system. The program also included tours of both the Parliament Buildings and Government House.

The farewell banquet at Government House with Her Honour, The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, PC, CM, OBC, Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, was a very special evening. Her remarks were educational and highlighted the various responsibilities of the Office of the Lieutenant-Governor including an explanation on "reserve legal powers". Her Honour's greetings both welcomed and congratulated the teachers on the nature of the work they do on behalf of all British Columbians in terms of acquainting our children with an understanding of the government structure in our complex country. The Deputy Speaker, John Weisbeck, MLA, commented on his personal experiences visiting classrooms to share his insights on the role of a Member of the Legislative Assembly and Deputy Speaker. He provided the teachers with humorous anecdotes as well as praise for the important and often unrecognized work they perform. Following both presentations, the teachers were invited to come forward and receive their recognition certificate for teaching excellence and have their photograph taken be-

tween Her Honour and the Deputy Speaker. This was a grand evening where the teachers felt honoured and recognized for the significant responsibility they hold with the students of tomorrow.

On Saturday morning, the teachers presented and shared their newly developed classroom activities. There were five presentations made from the three groups, all on different aspects of the Institute's program. The benefits to the teachers and the Legislative Assembly are many. The classroom activities will be posted on the Legislative Assembly's website for teachers all across B.C. to incorporate into their lesson planning for future years. The classroom activities outline the student audience, learning outcomes/objectives, activities/methods and materials/resources required. The five topics submitted are:

- Understanding the Purpose of Provincial Government
- Understanding the Role of Media in a Free and Democratic Society
- A New Voting System for B.C.
- Order of Precedence for B.C. – Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?
- The Influence of Media on Decision Making

Classroom activities created by British Columbia teachers who have had personal experience with the topic and professional experience with B.C.'s curriculum is an invaluable and tangible benefit of the Institute.

Overall, the inaugural B.C. Teachers' Institute was a resounding success. Comments from every participant echoed the sentiments of Institute as the best professional development of their careers. They were rejuvenated, enlightened and enthusiastic about teaching parliamentary democracy!

Notes

1. Criteria: 10% Personal Development, 40% Curriculum Planning, 20% Shared Experiences, 20% Letter of Recommendation and 10% Resume.
2. Breakdown: 18 Public, 2 Independent.
3. Breakdown: 12 Urban, 8 Rural.
4. Fee: \$150.00 (materials, accommodation and meals were covered; travel subsidies were also available for those teachers travelling great distances.)
5. Breakdown: 10 Secondary, 5 Elementary.
6. Honorarium: \$150.00 per day.