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# *How to Organize an Effective Constituency Office*

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by Peter MacLeod

*In contrast to the prestige of working on Parliament Hill, life in a constituency office takes place far from the media spotlight and away from the power of high politics. However, these unique and often overlooked institutions not only help to put a human face on government but have the potential to address the huge disconnect between Canadian and their politicians. This article is drawn from information gathered during the course of a two year research study which included visits to nearly one hundred constituency offices in all parts of Canada.*

**I**t is an unusual feature of contemporary political life that members of parliament are expected to be in two places at once. Prior to the proliferation of cheap air travel, an MP could comfortably expect to spend a short winter session in Ottawa and return to their riding through the spring, summer and early fall. Parliamentary life was keyed to agricultural cycle. Today, like the modern election campaign, it's keyed to the capacity of jetliners to cross time zones and the expectations of citizens to see their MP perform local duties as evidence that they have not yet lost touch. In this light, operating a constituency office provides not only a home base; it allows the MP to maintain a presence and keep the pulse of local affairs.

But few newly elected MPs pause to consider that winning their seat also entails opening and managing what amounts to a small business. Though they may keep standard office hours, an MP's staff can be expected to respond to an urgent request whether day or night. Annual revenues from Ottawa easily exceed a quarter of a million dollars, necessitating careful bookkeeping while elaborate rules complicate how the money can be spent. Each office employs two, three and sometimes four staffers, serves 100,000 citizen-clients and typically opens

well over a thousand new files each year.<sup>1</sup> To cope with demand and keep their personal touch, an increasing number of MPs in remote and rural-urban ridings choose to open additional branches, as constituency boundaries shift to absorb several small towns and communities.

Still, in spite of their complexity and growing importance very little attention has been afforded to the work of these offices. A relatively recent addition to Canada's parliamentary infrastructure – funding was increased without debate in 1972 permitting all MPs to open local offices – surprisingly little is known about the impact and relevance of what deservedly can be called 'the root system of parliament'.

Most constituency offices are scruffy, useful, modest places. They are often tucked away in former medical clinics and legal chambers. There is no standard template; no government approved floor plan. Constituency offices come in every size and shape: occupying nondescript corporate buildings, stuck between pizza shops in strip malls, occupying first floors of homes, or gamely hanging a shingle in a storefront along Main Street.

In this way, they are connected to but stand apart from the grandeur and pretense of parliament. They are front-line – all interface – doing the messy, remedial business of cleaning up bureaucratic misfires when programs fail to align neatly with needs of real people and settling local scores.

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**Peter MacKay's constituency office, one of nearly a hundred such offices visited by the author during preparation of the constituency project.** (photos: Stan Switalski, 2004)

The staffers themselves divide easily between lifers and flyers: those who diligently ensure the continuity of operations on the ground and those young and ambitious junior staffers who see the constituency office as a short track to a political life in Ottawa.<sup>2</sup> The best offices tend to be staffed by the former – citizens are rightfully wary of the latter – and over time a dedicated constituency assistant will become a kind of public service sage, a general practitioner capable of parsing application forms and knowing the ins and outs of every department and program, all the while keeping a finger to the wind of public opinion. Predictably, this sustained exposure leads to their developing an acute sensitivity to local need. It's across their desk and over their phones that the most delicate personal details pass: from the plight of a veteran, to the university prospects of a recent high school graduate.

Simultaneously the backstop and side door to every government service, the tremendous public value created by the constituency system goes uncounted by the planning departments that map out the paths of public service delivery. And yet, these offices, offering personable, detailed and efficient service, have plenty to teach the public service about how to earn the trust and confidence of the citizens they serve.

Moreover, because public service reform and democratic reform can or should be inextricably bound together, the constituency system deserves to be studied as a potential site for helping to address Canada's alleged 'democratic deficit'.<sup>3</sup> Successful constituency offices neatly illustrate an adage which deserves to be taken to heart by anyone genuinely committed to improving pub-

lic confidence in government and democratic participation: public service reform and democratic reform are flip sides of the same civic coin. Together they constitute a seamless experience of the state that political theorists and service delivery managers have been too quick to disassociate.

*Among Canada's political institutions, constituency offices stand alone as a kind of local infrastructure for encounter, recognition and engagement, connecting citizen to representative, and citizen to state during the 1400-odd days between elections.*

Some of the earliest offices, created by enterprising MPs like the young Ed Broadbent and Flora Macdonald, took their mandate to be exactly this. They were places to "keep in touch", to open up a space for a sustained conversation about the community's priorities and the intentions of the federal government.<sup>4</sup> It is only more recently as cutbacks diminished the frontline capacity of federal ministries and citizens themselves became less deferential in demanding better treatment that the advocacy and assistance functions of constituency offices grew.

Today, constituency offices attempt to balance seven core functions: to provide service and assistance in dealing with government departments, to engage the public, maintain a presence in the community, provide informal

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counseling on personal and professional matters, act as brokers and mediators between interests, collate local opinion, and advocate to each level of government and their party on matters concerning specific individuals and their community-at-large.

But to outline these functions is not to suggest their equivalency. Most constituency offices are demand-driven and calls for specific services seriously reduce the amount of staff time that can be dedicated to community consultation or other activities. For instance, metropolitan ridings routinely report spending upwards of 85% of their time on immigration files. Rural ridings assume the role of one-stop shop to government services. Disappointing turnout at town hall meetings and community discussions do little to encourage MPs to innovate. Instead, they hone their skills as local fix-its and trust that their efforts will be rewarded on election day. It is not surprising that many MPs wish they could spend more time on constituency work: it is the one place where they truly feel they are making a difference.

### **The Low Road to Democratic Reform**

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It remains to be seen whether the new parliament will have much appetite for meaningful democratic reform. Securing changes to any of the big three – electoral, parliamentary or constitutional reform – will require considerable political capital that the governing party may simply choose not to afford. These 'high road' reforms may ultimately serve the wider democratic interests of

the country, but less clear is whether reforming the senate, adopting proportional representation or bringing Quebec into the constitutional fold will actually produce the revitalization in public confidence and renewed energy for politics that Canada sorely needs.

By contrast, the 'low road to democratic reform' invites its travelers along a different path. If electoral systems are to political theorists what cathedrals and skyscrapers are to architects, then the triplicate form, the telephone query, and the public meeting are the truck and trade of the low road thinker. Their concern is the everyday experience of government. To the low road thinker, genuine engagement and perhaps the rekindling of a more animated relationship between citizens and their state can only be achieved through participatory experiences, not simply more accurately representative assemblies. This means that the trust gap that has widened within almost every western democracy cannot be wholly addressed through high road reforms alone. Creating a more representative portrayal of political opinion in our legislative assemblies is a worthwhile and laudable goal, but so too is the enrichment of whatever means we have to deepen and sustain an ongoing political conversation.

The opening of the 39th Parliament and the creation of Service Canada – a federal agency that promises to streamline and improve service delivery and, perhaps, consequently reduce demand on constituency offices – is rare opportunity to begin reconceptualizing the role and relevance of parliament's root system. At the very least it

### *Some Tips for New MPs*

- Choose a location that is accessible, visible and inviting. Remember to consider bus routes and parking, but also try to encourage walk-in traffic.
- Consider whether your office space is sufficiently inviting. Does it make strangers feel welcome or guarded?
- Use your office space to communicate your commitment and progress made.
- Invest in good signage that is original, easily visible and appropriate.
- Make sure your office has cross-partisan appeal. Avoid party colours.
- If possible, co-locate in the same building as your provincial colleague.
- Plan a schedule of events, discussions and special occasions throughout the year.
- Make sure your staffers feel safe. Do they have good sight lines and a secondary exit?
- Ready yourself to be operational from the first day following the election.
- Hire experience over politics. The best constituency assistants love people, problem-solving and know their communities inside and out.
- Invest even modestly in custom software packages or databases to help track queries and files.
- Establish advisory councils and convene miniature citizens assemblies regularly.
- Create an internship position immediately.
- Consider offering your space to community groups for meetings or meetings between different groups.

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offers new and re-elected MPs alike an occasion to re-think their local operations.

### Parliament at the Periphery

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All constituency offices necessarily reflect the interests and personality of their MP. But other than a few posters or professional or honorary certificates, few MPs take the time to see that their office speaks clearly and positively about their work and their commitment. Nor do they create a space that is functionally appropriate. Staffers typically lament not having enough privacy for sensitive telephone calls. Citizens either feel exposed in poorly furnished offices or are asked to find a seat in narrow waiting areas squeezed between filing cabinets.

The varied and conflicting operational roles of a constituency office translate awkwardly into a spatial plan. Rushed from the campaign trail to Ottawa, most MPs opt to do little more than rent the first available space that meets a minimum of criteria. Furniture is either ordered new or inherited from the defeated incumbent's office and, jumbled together, many offices never shake the campaign sensibility of stacking chairs, old coffee pots and poor lighting.

The most successful offices begin with an idea – a sense of purpose – and design their space accordingly. Is the office to be a service bureau, a space for civic engagement, a local incubator for public organizations and events, a community showcase, a publishing house, a coffee klatch or meeting point? Is it to be an enclave or an open door?

Implicit in each of these choices is a sensibility about the role of the MP: her responsibilities, relationship and stature in the community. The subsequent design choices an MP makes conveys this understanding. Is she accessible or a step removed? Is her local office a priority or an inconvenient duty? Does she take a formal or informal approach to dealing with her constituents?

Some MPs go to great lengths to challenge their constituent's expectations. They remove their desks and opt instead for two or more comfortable chairs. They insist that people are welcomed into an inviting and well-lit space and offered either tea or coffee. They hang new works by local artists and plan well in advance a series of both political and non-political events that draw people

to their space. They furnish boardrooms that local groups can book and create community and issue boards that detail recent successes as well as upcoming legislation and events. They attempt to collocate with their provincial counterpart or a government bureau. In effect, they try and become a hub in their community and make reaching out to new groups and individuals a priority.

These MPs are gradually expanding what it means to be an elected representative, instead conceiving of themselves as something akin to civic entrepreneurs, who extend and use their offices to generate new ideas and allegiances.

In this way, the most innovative MPs are proving Trudeau's old adage that 'off the Hill, MPs are a bunch of "nobodies" to be completely wrong. All MPs, even ministers, know that once they leave the Hill and return to their constituency, they are once again their own boss. They can again enjoy the small pleasures and courtesies that accompany a local VIP, with neither the party whip, nor the leader's office spoiling the day.

In fact, given the discontent that has long simmered along the backbench of every party, it is not surprising that this frustration is steadily being translated into new vitality at the local end of parliament. It is a subtle trend that will continue to grow as MPs make ever-greater use of communications technology and the media and become more adept and strategic in pursuing local objectives. It is these innovators who recognize the constituency office as an important source of legitimacy and ideas that will most radically change the way parliament works, not from the centre, but increasingly from the periphery.

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1. See Peter MacLeod, "The High Cost of Constituency Politics", *Globe and Mail*, November 24, 2004.
2. Peter MacLeod. *Low Road to Democratic Reform: Constituency Offices, Public Service Provision and Citizen Engagement*. Report to the Democratic Reform Secretariat, Privy Council Office, Ottawa, 2005.
3. Peter MacLeod. "Governance at the periphery", *Opinion Canada*, January 27, 2005.
4. Bea Vongdouangchanh, "The Constituency Project", *The Hill Times*, November 8, 2004.