

Guest Editorial

Democracy in the 21st Century: Advice for Newly Elected Members of Parliament

My first word of advice to a newly elected member is to stay grounded and do not lose your families. After most elections 40% of members do not return. The average life span of a parliamentarian is barely six years. If you reach ten years you had a very long distinguished political career. Always assume that each election will be your last and make sure that your family will be there when your parliamentary career is over.

Secondly make sure your constituency is properly served by taking a personal interest. Do not delegate everything to staff. Also, I do not recommend handling constituency complaints by immediately writing to the Minister. I always tried to contact the office with responsibility for delivering the service in my constituency. If they could not solve the problem I would go to the next level and then I could go to the minister at some point. Once people understand that you are trying to solve a problem at the local level with the least disruption possible, it is amazing how much co-operation you will get.

You may notice, as I did, that in some cases the civil service is quite happy to have members serve as their agents. It is a big country and when we try to run bureaucracy on the cheap there are lots of problems out there. Sometimes the public service does not know that things are slipping through the cracks so they are grateful if you come and explain to them what is happening. You start off slowly and you work co-operatively and eventually what happens is that you get a fix. It helps to make friends in the bureaucracy.

I always tried to talk to the bureaucrat who was in charge of my area. So if it was the director general in Winnipeg, I would go to Winnipeg or if he was in Thunder Bay or Sault Ste. Marie or wherever, I would go there and say, "Look, this is your problem and your inefficiencies and if it is not solved, I will have to take it up with the minister and I will have to raise it in committee because this clearly is an indication that your department is out of whack".



Of course the better you become at constituency work the more demands there will be on your time. I used to try to work on a five week cycle whereby I would be in the constituency on three of the five week-ends with one week-end reserved for party business or attending conferences and one week-end reserved for myself and my family. On those week-ends when I was not in the constituency I would send out a press release indicating where I was and what I was doing. In most cases people will get accustomed to the idea that you are not deserting them if you tell them what it is you are doing.

My third piece of advice relates to policy. Basically you have to decide what you would like to accomplish as a MP. If not you may be sure that somebody else in Ottawa will tell you what to do. When I was a Member of Parliament I used about 10% of the budgeted time that I spent in Ottawa for my projects. Out of that came a whole range of initiatives. Do things that are going to make you, not others, satisfied.

If you want to do creative things you will have to spend a great deal of time convincing your own party colleagues of your ideas and of directions you would like the party to take. This can be a problem because parties do not have very many policy conferences. If you look at the cycle of all the parties, it ranges from two to four years before there is a party conference so a lot of policy tends to be made on the fly as issues come up. You have to be plugged into your caucus committees to make sure that the things you would like to see done are done.

The most important debates that you will have in your political career will be behind the closed doors of the caucus and in the political arena of your political parties. You have to be thinking in terms of your relationship with the party and your ability to convince them as to where you want to go.

You want to be thinking of doing things to advance yourself and your ideas. This is difficult to do it in the environment we work because the mainstream press is not interested in public policy. It is extraordinarily difficult for backbenchers to get their names in the paper unless they are attacking their leader or doing something equally outrageous.

Let me conclude with four tips for members who want to get things done. The first is to get the information right. In my 20 years in the House of Commons I saw too many members destroy their political careers by making speeches in caucus or in the House of Commons when they thought they knew everything there was to know about the subject and tried to wing it. Often they got torn apart because they really did not have a substantive understanding of what they were talking about. When you make a speech you never know who is going to be listening. Only speak when you have a firm grasp on the issue. It is difficult enough to keep on top of a lot of issues. The facts keep changing and if you go in without having done a modicum of effort, your reputation is going to sink very dramatically.

My second tip is to get educated outside politics is by attending conferences. The conference business in Canada is enormous. I was surprised when I became Information Commissioner, I attended an international conference and lo and behold six provincial legislators showed up from the Prairie provinces because they were interested in access to information and privacy issues. No matter what your issue, there are conferences that you should seek out. Start attending those things and finding out what really goes on, because that is the way the private sector educates itself.

My third tip relates to staffing. I can recall having some problems with some of my staffers who got away on me. They tend to be young, just out of university and they tend to be very keen. But they need a tight rein. If you are not careful they will go out and make commitments on your behalf and some of those commitments you may not like or be able to fulfill.

Finally, familiarize yourself with parliamentary procedure which includes a whole array of techniques that many members do not bother us-

ing. One of my favourites was the starred question. This allows you to put down a written question on the Order Paper and then the government answers it orally. So you could do a whole range of things for your constituency by starred questions and that shows up in the House of Commons as a question you have asked. This is particularly useful for private members on the government side who have little access to Question Period.

Anyone who was elected thinking that members of Parliament mainly fly around the country, attending banquets and turning up occasionally in their ridings, is certainly in for a surprise. The challenges you are facing are formidable — the constituency burden is unrelenting, the party is always demanding, the complexities of legislation are difficult to understand, and today there is even more emphasis on issues of accountability and ethics than in my time in the House of Commons.

To be a successful Member of Parliament you will have to combine the research techniques of a graduate student, the tact of a diplomat, the compassion of a social worker and the organizational skills of a CEO in a medium-sized business. You will have to do this while under constant attack from opponents and under the watchful eye of the media. It is a daunting task but the rewards in terms of personal satisfaction are immense.

John Reid was a Member of Parliament from 1965-1984. He was a Minister of Federal-Provincial Relations from 1978-1979. He was appointed Information Commissioner in 1998. This is an edited version of a presentation to newly elected members of the 38th Parliament organized by the Library of Parliament in collaboration with the Parliamentary Centre on November 15, 2004.