
A Model Legislature in Alberta

by Howard Yeung and Spence Nichol

There is a pregnant silence on the floor of the Alberta Legislative Assembly, interrupted by three staccato raps on the heavy mahogany doors at the front of the chamber. The doors swing open, members shuffle to their feet, and a man intones, "Madame Speaker, His Honour the Lieutenant Governor awaits." The Sergeant-at-Arms, the Lieutenant Governor, the Premier, and the Clerk sweep into the room and past the clerk's table, each taking their respective seat on the chamber floor. The members collapse into their seats, a stirring Speech from the Throne is read, and the members bang their desks in approval, quickly rising to their feet in ecstatic applause.

And so began the 2005 annual Alberta High School Model Legislature. Eighty-two students from around the province have gathered under the Dome this Saturday morning for a weekend of debating and learning about Parliamentary processes. It was a diverse group of grade 10, 11 and 12 students who have a general interest in debating, and a strong understanding of current events. Many have experience in actual political activities; almost all volunteer in other ways in their communities. Indeed, their résumés could read like those of actual MLAs; their age is betrayed only by their height, haircuts, and hipness. The gentlemen have not quite perfected the half-windsor, their neckties self-consciously askew, while the confident strut of some of the ladies is betrayed when they wobble on their high heels.

The night before, the returning participants are greeting familiar faces in the Legislature Rotunda, occasionally pausing to introduce a newcomer. A few clearly stand out, working the room as political veterans, while others hang back, struck by their buttery-rich marble surroundings and the Legislature's aura of power. But the moment for politicking quickly passes, and the students

proceed into the chamber for a briefing on Parliamentary procedure. The briefer, who is also serving as the Speaker for the weekend, is Jamie Tronnes, a Stephen Harper aide and University of Alberta graduate who has flown in to Edmonton for this event. Tronnes distills hundreds of pages of parliamentary authorities into a fifteen minute how-to guide on Parliament. For the returning students, this is old hat; for the new students, it's a bit overwhelming. All will put the procedures to use soon enough; for now, they are mustered off to their caucus rooms to begin 24 hours of strategizing and politicking.

The students' teacher chaperones look on amusedly, knowing that many of the students' best-laid plans will come to naught. Some students clearly covet leadership positions, and have been maneuvering for weeks within their schools for their peers' support. No school's delegation is large enough to dominate, however, and the students must look elsewhere for support. The art of coalition building becomes a matter of calculating support, and sometimes settling scores. School rivalries certainly play a role: many of these students have participated in other inter-collegiate speech and debate activities, and are keen to out-manoeuvre strong individual rivals or schools. Model Legislature forces these students to put aside at least some of these differences, and in the spirit of the finest Parliamentary tradition, the students quickly begin to negotiate and form alliances with each other.

Howard Yeung and Spence Nichol were organizers of the November 2005 Alberta High School Model Legislature. For more information on the Alberta Debate and Speech Association, visit their website at <http://www.compumart.ab.ca/adebate/>.



Members of the 2005 High School Model Legislature in the Alberta Legislative Assembly

A caucus advisor, a university student volunteering his weekend, directs the caucus through the process of electing a party leader, a house leader, and a whip. The caucus advisor stipulates that each of these positions represent a different school, to promote participation and to prevent one school from dominating. Party leaders then select their cabinet ministers, who will double as critics when in opposition. The caucus then turns its attention to the substantive policy issues.

Some students are keen to discuss policy issues, angling for support of their own party's bill while denigrating competing bills. The bills have been prepared in advance by the organizing team, and this is the students' first opportunity to see them. A list of questions on the general topic of each bill has been previously released, to allow students time to research. One student arrives with a 2-inch thick binder of research material.

Bill topics are the hardest thing for the organizing team: they must be simple, current, have clear partisan lines, be debatable, and easily amendable. Coaches are also invited to offer suggestions. This year, the New Democrat bill was the Alberta Fuel Act, to reduce gas prices; the Liberal bill concerned public auto insurance ("two-tier health care for cars" wisecracks one student); and the Conservative bill was the improbably named

Competitiveness Amplification Program of Innovation and Tax Assessment Liberty Act, mercifully abbreviated as the CAPITAL Act.

The organizing team has spent the past several months bringing this event together, not just writing the bills, but coordinating with the coaches, refining the Standing Orders, preparing the order paper, arranging corporate sponsorship, and issuing a news release. Besides the Speaker, Jamie Tronnes, the group is managed by Howard Yeung, a U of A School of Business alumnus and now a business consultant; Spence Nichol, a political science student at U of A; Lisa Boukall, another business alumnus and strategic planner in Calgary; and Anastasia Kulpa, a bilingual arts student at U of A's Campus St. Jean. The organizing team is supported by Willis Kachuk, the coordinator of the Alberta Debate and Speech Association (ADSA). Kachuk takes care of publicizing the event to high school coaches, and handles the details of registration. He also sends thank-you notes out after the event, and liaises with the Sergeant-at-Arms, who oversees access to the Legislature's facilities.

All-party support is what makes Model Legislature one of the few events granted the privilege of using the actual Legislative Chamber each year. The process of organizing the event begins the previous spring, with a let-

ter to Speaker Ken Kowalski formally requesting the use of the Legislature. After his approval, the Sergeant-at-Arms' office arranges for security staff, conference rooms, and catering. A pretend mace, a lacquered wooden bat gaudily bedecked with cereal box jewels and crowned by two arching slices of tin, is also kindly provided.

This mace, of course, looks out of place on the Clerk's table. It is surrounded by the trappings of the Chamber: the mahogany Speakers' chair and canopy that dominates the room; the gigantic portraits of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip that supervise the chamber; the green Pennsylvanian marble and mahogany panelling laid over creamy white walls; and, of course, the members' desks, 82 mahogany boxes fronting 82 green leather chairs, the headrests of which are embossed with the Alberta Coat of Arms. All is brightly lit by six hundred light bulbs set in an arched ceiling.

Some of the people who actually work in this room are there that evening. Seven MLAs representing each of the three major provincial parties (the Progressive Conservatives, the Liberals, and the New Democrats) came out to speak to the students, each urging this next generation of leaders to continue to be involved in the political process. The MLAs are enthusiastic about sharing their insights, especially about the bills, but the organizing committee asks them to demur. This is an opportunity for the students to put their political thinking to work.

Afterwards, a few guest MLAs loiter in the caucus rooms, curious to see what the students have to say about each bill. In the Confederation Room adjacent the chamber, Liberal MLA Mo Elsalhy asks a battery of pointed questions of the newly-acclaimed Liberal leader: what is her leadership style? How will she keep her party united? What is her strategy for promoting the Liberal bill while defeating the others? The leader, a returning participant, deftly answers Elsalhy's questions, simultaneously solidifying the support of her caucus.

Upstairs in the Carillon Room, the New Democrat caucus has just elected its leader, a Grade 12 student who, like her Liberal counterpart, also quickly takes charge. This caucus, however, is much more democratic, insisting on short discussions and votes for each decision. They also stipulate that there must be gender parity in the caucus positions.

On the floor of the Chamber, the Conservatives are having problems selecting a leader. There is much ambition: everyone, it seems, wants to put their stamp on the party by having an important position. Each candidate gives a quick thirty second speech about why they want to be leader. One candidate, a Grade 12 student, is a returning participant, the other a Grade 10 student at

Model Legislature for the first time. A two-way race for the party leadership mirrors the oddities of real-life leadership contests. A group of Conservatives from Calgary had, on the bus trip up to Edmonton, decided they would elect the returning Grade 12 student as leader. But despite this faction having a majority in caucus, their preferred candidate loses by one vote: three girls had decided that the other candidate was cuter, and cast their votes for him instead. Could this be the next Trudeaumania?

The new leader quickly finds himself on shaky ground. In his thirty second leadership candidacy speech, he promised that all other positions would be elected. But his first proclamation as leader is to appoint two friends as House Leader and Whip. A storm of protest ensues, the appointments are withdrawn, and elections are held.

By now each caucus has divided itself into working groups, each tasked with examining one of the bills to decide whether the party will support it, and what amendments should be made to it. Horse-trading with the other two parties begins: since each party has almost exactly a third of the seats, compromise with at least one of the other parties is a must.

The formal proceedings of Friday evening come to a conclusion at nine o'clock. Edmonton-area students retire to their homes, while the contingent from Calgary returns to their hotel, where their politicking continues into the night. All return bleary-eyed at eight thirty the next day, still slightly tired, but definitely full of energy.

After hour-long caucus meetings with more back-room dealing, the House convenes. The Premier has changed overnight; the Grade 10 student who was elected to the position announces that he doesn't think he's qualified to be leader, and he passes the job off to the student who was elected Whip.

The Opening Ceremonies commence with the Clerk advising that there is no Speaker, and that one must be elected. The Premier and Leader of the Opposition nominate the member for Barrhead-Westlock (the riding of actual Speaker Ken Kowalski), where Tronnes is sitting, and she is unanimously elected. Tronnes has fun resisting the tug of the Premier and Leader of the Opposition, but makes it to the Speaker's chair to assert the privileges of the House and begin presiding. The doors sweep open for the Lieutenant Governor, who this year is Grant McLean, a former aide-de-camp to a Lieutenant Governor, and the Speech from the Throne is read. Sensing the mood of the House to proceed to the highlight of the weekend, Tronnes announces the start of Question Period.



Members of the 2005 Model Legislature meet in caucus to discuss strategy

The first question, by tradition, goes to the Leader of the Opposition. “What is this government doing about the rising cost of gasoline?” she demands. The Premier blusters. “We’re doing lots to help out the average Albertan. Everyone’s getting four hundred bucks in January! And we’re doing other stuff, too.” With this, he trails off, realizes he’s got nothing else to say, and concludes with the epic utterance, “and, yeah.” Hoots of derision erupt from the Opposition benches, and catcalls about fat cats sally across the floor.

Were someone simply listening to this Question Period, she would hear little difference from an actual session.

For the organizers, that fact is somewhat frustrating. All of the organizers are CPAC aficionados, with a definite preference for the informed, respectful Prime Minister’s Questions sessions of the British Parliament. Much effort is put into instructing the students to avoid the sort of meaningless give-and-take and posturing that often typifies a real session. The proceedings are intended to be conducted with “wisdom, temperance, and prudence,” qualities not always on display in any Parliament: the students in the chamber this morning tend to emulate the less-than-august example of many Canadian politicians. The debaters’ rule of thumb that heckles should be short, witty, and to the point also applies to the questions asked in Question Period. This is a difficult skill to master: very

few students have a natural ability to pop an absolute zinger across the chamber.

This is not to say that the students are not generally well-informed. Many questions come straight from recent headlines, or are clearly inspired by the provincial Social Studies curriculum. The back-and-forth is quick and clearly ideological. When, after Question Period, debate moves on to the Progressive Conservative bill, the MLAs for a day are very well prepared to ask thoughtful questions. Some platitudes about the importance of economic growth do arise, but they are generally ignored because they are not meaningful contributions to the debate.

Each party is anxious to pass its own bill, and the Premier and Government House Leader are soon shuttling in and out of the chamber to bargain with representatives of the other parties. The bargaining is exclusively tit-for-tat; there is little effort to appeal to principle or scruples. If these students were running the province, the government would almost certainly be in perpetual minority, for these MLAs are free of any sense that they will be punished by voters. Some returning students complain that the NDP gets the short end of the stick every year because of this: since the Progressive Conservative and Liberal bills have already been dealt with when the NDP bill arises, those caucuses have a tendency to “forget” their obligations to the NDP.

One of the trappings of the Legislature that Model Legislature seeks to emulate is a page service for passing notes around the Chamber. This year, the 1st Sherwood

Park Rangers and the 4th Sherwood Park Pathfinders have come to earn a merit badge by performing this important function. The pages are instructed to read the notes and advise the organizers of notes not directly related to Parliamentary happenings: “U R hot, what’s your phone #?” is strictly forbidden, yet it pops up at least once every year.

When lunch time arrives, the Members are ushered down to the Legislature cafeteria for a quick meal. The chamber is suddenly quiet. Some male participants retreat to the men’s washroom just off the chamber, impressed by the unusual amenity that is the shoe buffer.

Lunch ends quickly, and the members hustle back to the Chamber. After a second round of Question Period, debate moves on to the Liberal and New Democrat bills. In a departure from Parliamentary convention, the party in government rotates with each sitting. This way, the parties that would otherwise be in opposition have much more leeway in the content of their bills: as government, they are free to introduce money bills. Students also get to approach Question Period from the two perspectives of asking and answering Opposition inquiries. The intent is to develop an appreciation of the give-and-take of the Parliamentary process, and the thrill of contributing to political life. There are probably future leaders in this group, but all are future citizens who must learn to make respectful, responsible contributions to the larger community.

For the organizers, it is therefore gratifying to receive feedback from the students that, for instance, “there were open heated debates with heckling, but [it] stayed orderly.” Another student remarks that “I enjoyed the obvious intelligence of all members, but mostly I like the behind the scenes dealing, the back-room politics! So fun!”

The organizing team convenes a short meeting with Kim Shulha, who represents Bell, which sponsored the event. This is the first year in recent times that the orga-

nizing committee sought sponsorship: rising costs for using the Legislature and providing lunch brought the cost per student to nearly \$30—not including the cost to Calgary students of a bus and hotel rooms. Bell’s sponsorship reduced the cost per student to \$20, and provided a modest cash award to the top Parliamentarian and top speakers.

Shortly before the end of the session, the organizing team meets to decide who shall receive the Premier’s Cup, a coveted award given to the student who best exemplifies the qualities of a Parliamentarian. In a word, what is sought after is statesmanship: recipients are articulate, passionate, well-informed speakers who lead and collaborate with both their own caucus members and those of the other parties. Each caucus also chooses a top Parliamentarian by secret ballot.

As the ballots are being tallied, royal assent is given to the two bills that passed, both significantly amended. The organizers joke that they are disappointed that the NDP did not propose to amend the title of the Progressive Conservative bill, the CAPITAL Act, to be the DAS KAPITAL Act.

Awards are given out. The Liberal leader received both the Premier’s Cup and her caucus’ top Parliamentarian award in 2005. The pages, the Speaker, and the caucus advisors receive standing ovations. As security staff start to encourage students to depart, many pictures are taken in front of the throne-like Speaker’s chair. Some students can’t resist the inexorable draw of sitting in Ralph Klein’s chair either. As the students move down into the Rotunda, and then out the door, they are talking about nothing but politics.

Model Legislature has been held now for over thirty years. Many of this years’ participants will return for the 2006 Model Legislature, which will coincide with the one hundredth anniversary of the first sitting of the Alberta Legislature. The task of governing never ends.