
How to be an Effective Speaker

by Michel Bissonnet, MNA

In this article the author, drawing upon twenty-seven years experience as an MLA and five years as presiding officer, offers some thoughts on the qualities required to preside over Assembly proceedings, direct legislative services and represent the Legislature in interparliamentary relations.



Is there a specific formula for being a good Speaker? I would say both Yes and No. There are certainly a few essential ingredients but they have to be used carefully in just the right amounts, adjusting to the various situations that arise along the way. This is true for the three roles Speakers play. The key ingredients include neutrality, impartiality, respect, tact,

understanding, being a good listener, balance, a sense of what makes people tick, sensitivity and sometimes humour, but also firmness, order, authority and determination. In other words, an iron hand in a velvet glove. And so that there be no doubt whatsoever as to one's neutrality or impartiality, it is wise to totally refrain from participating in partisan politics, even in one's own riding.

Simply put, certain intrinsic human qualities are essential for an effective speakership, but the position also requires a lot of on-the-job training. You need to be very familiar with the unique world of politics and to always keep in mind that the individuals over whom you exercise authority have all been elected by their constituents, and thus deserve respect. You must also never forget that MNAs are vulnerable in the sense that people are always trying to catch them in a mistake. The Speaker must be careful not to add to that pressure. It is undeniable that

human relationships in a parliament are coloured by the context of political confrontation. In other words, when faced with a difficult situation, the Speaker must simply act as a good father or mother would and rely on "good old common sense". I must say that my experience as caucus chair provided good training in that respect. During caucus meetings – and even more so if the party is in power – Members must be given complete freedom to voice their viewpoint and sometimes their disagreement. The caucus chair must arbitrate between the majority caucus position and that of cabinet, since they are not always compatible.

Although wisdom is needed in all the roles of the office of Speaker, it is paramount in the Speaker's primary role, that of presiding over the proceedings of the Assembly. This is undoubtedly the role in which the Speaker is the most vulnerable, since, like a referee, he or she must apply formal rules to a political debating "match" in which the objective is to score points against one's opponents. In such a context the Speaker is often caught between a rock and a hard place; he or she must avoid "stealing the show" but still ensure that the basic rules of decorum are observed. After all, the image of an assembly depends largely on the ability of the Speaker to enforce the rules of the game, while still allowing free political debate.

In contrast with other assemblies, raising points of order is allowed during Question Period in the National Assembly. To prevent procedural questions from monopolizing the debate at the expense of subjects of public interest, I regularly ask for the Members' cooperation, urging them to refrain from unparliamentary language. I make a point of not calling a Member to order unless the statement clearly contravenes the Standing Orders. In addition to a general request for cooperation, I often sig-

Michel Bissonnet is President of the Québec National Assembly. This is a revised version of his presentation at the 25th Canadian Presiding Officers Conference held in Québec City from January 24 to 27, 2008.

nal to Members when they are in danger of crossing the line. Of course, if Members use language that contravenes our rules, I do not hesitate to rise and ask them to withdraw the statement. And if I do not, one of the House Leaders will probably ask me to do so. In those situations, I prefer to take the lead so that Question Period does not turn into a largely procedural battle.

Another aspect of the way I approach my role as Speaker is to avoid being overly procedure-oriented. As much as possible, I avoid directly quoting from the Standing Orders, preferring to simply outline the key principles in accessible language. I reserve a more “by the book” approach for when I render a formal decision after a period of deliberation, which I have had to do on a number of occasions since the beginning of the current legislature.

This is the first time since the current Standing Orders were adopted in 1984 that Québec has three recognized parliamentary groups. Moreover, we have a minority government for the first time since 1878. I have had to rule on the organization of Question Period as well as the allocation of time for Opposition business. Since the parties were not able to reach agreements on those questions, it was up to me to make a decision.

In such circumstances, all the ingredients I mentioned earlier must be carefully measured and used. The Speaker must also not hesitate to call on legal and parliamentary procedure specialists to help make the most appropriate ruling. To maintain a democratic balance during parliamentary proceedings, one must be extremely rigorous. There is no room for error. For that reason, to better assist the presiding officer in his or her sensitive role, we have been using new technologies in recent years to maintain constant communication between the Table and the Chair, thus ensuring a continuous link between the Secretary General, his assistants and the Speaker. This frees the Speaker from being concerned with quoting exact Standing Order numbers or the exact content of procedural rules, allowing him or her to concentrate on the message being communicated by the Members. This also enables the Speaker to intervene quickly when there is a breach of the Standing Orders or when ruling on points of order.

In order to resolve certain deadlocks in Assembly proceedings, I sometimes meet with the House Leaders to present my point of view on an issue, or to hear their proposals on how to proceed in particular circumstances. Likewise, in matters of parliamentary reform, I make sure that each House Leader has the opportunity to express an opinion so that we can reach the consensus necessary for amending our rules of procedure.

To ensure a unified approach to the duties of the office and to facilitate the organized and smooth conduct of parliamentary proceedings, I meet weekly with the other presiding officers, my executive assistant, the Secretary General and his principal advisors for a meal that we have christened the Speaker’s luncheon. We discuss the difficulties encountered by each presiding officer in the week before and those anticipated in the coming week, with each presiding officer having the opportunity to voice his or her concerns and opinions.

Administering the Assembly

As concerns administration, it is up to the Speaker to see that the Members are provided the services they need to enable them to more fully exercise their functions. The Speaker must also prepare annual budget estimates in consultation with the Office of the National Assembly. Lastly, the Speaker is responsible for security in and around the Assembly buildings and for the protection of the people who work there.

To the same extent that a good relationship with the House Leaders is conducive to the smooth conduct of parliamentary proceedings, I am convinced that I can only be an effective administrator if I am open, cooperative and receptive in my relations with the Whips of the parliamentary groups who are my key collaborators within the Office of the National Assembly. In the days before a meeting of the Office, I inform them of the items on the agenda. I seek their approval and, when there is no consensus, I try to find common ground so that Office decisions reflect as much as possible the will of all the Members on important matters that involve them directly.

In practical terms, the Office of the National Assembly is responsible for specifying what resources may be made available to the Members. It determines the staffing levels for Assembly administrative services and approves annual budget estimates. As well, the Office must authorize service contracts and purchase contracts over \$75,000. The Whips coordinate the positions taken by their parliamentary group within the Bureau, which demonstrates the important role they play in the administration of the Assembly. Constant dialogue and cooperation between the Speaker and the Whips are therefore crucial.

In addition to my all-important relationship with the House Leaders and Whips, I make it a point of honour to make myself available to all the Members; my door is always open to them. I sound them out and remain attentive to their needs, particularly as concerns the services offered to them by the Assembly administration. I make sure to forward their comments to our administrative

team, headed up by the Secretary General, and I see to it that there is appropriate follow-up.

This would not be possible without a close working relationship between myself and the Secretary General and the management staff of the Assembly. Our collaboration must be frank, direct and respectful. My staff and I take the same approach with all Assembly employees. Respect and trust make for happier employees who are more inclined to give their best on the job.

Representing the Assembly

The Speaker plays a significant role in defining and conducting the interparliamentary relations of the Assembly. Developing leading-edge parliamentary expertise and conducting a broad-based search for credible solutions represent a daunting challenge for the Members. By putting them in contact with their counterparts from other regions and countries who have the same concerns, interparliamentary relations better equip parliamentarians to play their triple role as representative of their constituents, legislator and overseer of the executive. At the same time, Members who are active on the interparliamentary scene also contribute to consolidating parliamentary democracy and raising international awareness of Québec culture and expertise.

As Speaker, I am in charge of the international relations of the National Assembly, which means that I determine priorities and organize our participation in international activities. I establish priorities on the basis of the following major objectives:

- increasing the effectiveness of the institution of parliament and of elected representatives in the areas of legislation, government oversight, examination of issues of public interest, and representation;
- establishing the international position of the National Assembly and increasing its influence in interparliamentary networks;
- fostering the active participation of the National Assembly in building a global community founded on democracy, peace, justice and prosperity; and
- increasing the international contribution of Québec society, especially in its fields of excellence.

Just as I do in the conduct of Assembly proceedings and in administrative matters, I seek to bring all the parliamentary groups on board when establishing the gen-

eral orientation of our interparliamentary relations. I see to it that political pluralism is strictly respected by forming delegations composed of Members from the various parliamentary groups. I also make sure that the Assembly's international activities remain separate from but coherent with government activities. Furthermore, I ensure that each parliamentary group is represented in the assignment of positions of responsibility within sections and delegations of interparliamentary organizations.

I do not limit my role in representing the Assembly to interparliamentary relations. One role that I am particularly fond of is the educational mission of the Assembly. In recent years, the Assembly has developed several educational activities, including five parliamentary simulations for students of different age groups. We also organize a mock parliament for teachers from all educational levels and another one for members of the public who are retired. Another educational activity organized by the Assembly is my annual visit to twenty or so secondary schools to speak to the students about democracy and the role of the Assembly and its Members. I always invite the Members representing the region concerned to take part in these meetings.

Conclusion

Essential to the success of a Speaker is the role of the Clerk. The Clerk, or Secretary General as he is known in Quebec, must be given a free hand in the duties of office, especially with respect to parliamentary proceedings and Assembly administration. The Speaker's office must never interfere with the prerogatives of the Secretary General. The Speaker and the Secretary General must work together or in a complementary fashion but never against each other. In other words, it is in the Speaker's best interest to establish a positive working relationship with the Secretary General and his management staff.

Beyond the principle of neutrality which must necessarily guide the Speaker of any parliamentary assembly, the Speaker's legitimacy and authority depend on a multitude of factors. Although there is no magic formula for success, several ingredients, as mentioned earlier, are essential. But I think I have left out the most important one of all. A good Speaker enjoys his work and enjoys working with the Members.