
“New Kids on the Block”

A Look at Rookie Members of Ontario’s Provincial Parliament

Sabrina Hoque

While academics have produced a plethora of research on rookie Members of Parliament not much has not been written on the challenges and perspectives faced by rookie politicians at the provincial level. This article seeks to examine the impact and efficacy of such ‘newness’ on good governance at the provincial level. It is based primarily on interviews with rookie and veteran MPPs, legislative staff members, and others directly involved with the political process in Queen’s Park after the October 2007 provincial elections. The key questions addressed in this paper are: how much vitality and new energy do rookie MPPs inject into the provincial legislature? How are their efforts manifested and differentiated from MPPs that preceded them? Indeed, what challenges do rookie MPPs with innovative ambitions face by those veterans seeking to uphold and maintain the traditional practice and status quo?

The role of an MPP backbencher is “to faithfully espouse their parties’ policies in the Legislature and on the hustings; to be ombudsmen for their constituents; and to familiarize themselves with the details of complex areas of policy.”¹ When asked what defined an ‘effective’ MPP and whether years of experience in politics played a defining role, interviewees responded with varying answers, although mainly with a theme of an MPP’s connectivity to the constituents.²

Yasir Naqvi, rookie MPP for Ottawa Centre, stated that an ‘effective MPP’ is one who is a representation of the needs of their local community; one who listens, engages in outreach programs, is able to prioritize issues and immediately start working on them. In essence, an ‘effective’ MPP is one who “does

not get sucked into the life of Queen’s Park.” While admitting that as a rookie MPP, she is still learning the determinants of an ‘effective’ MPP, Laura Albanese, rookie MPP of York South-Weston, was in agreement with her fellow liberal caucus member, stating that an ‘effective MPP’ was “one who holds the needs of the community close at heart.”

In addition to staying connected to the constituents, Charles Sousa, rookie MPP of Mississauga-South, maintains it is also very important to be respectful, sincere, and empathetic of everyone with whom you have dealings; including constituents and staff members. Following along the same lines of placing importance on MPP personalities and behaviour, MPP of Oak Ridges-Markham, Helena Jaczek, identified several MPPs whom she felt were ‘effective’ role models. Common characteristics she identified were “their ability to stay calm, provide solid facts and maintain a decent pitch of voice. They thank honourable members for questions, are respectful when answering questions in a calm manner. They are also very concerned with their community and communicate with their constituents.”

Paul Miller, rookie MPP (with a background in municipal politics) of Hamilton East-Stoney Creek,

Sabrina Hoque, a former Ontario Legislative intern, is a Ph. D candidate at the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association. The author thanks Louise Carbert and Jennifer Smith of Dalhousie University for insightful comments and feedback when reviewing this paper. She also thanks Henry Jacek of McMaster University and current Director of the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme.

defined an 'effective MPP' as one who "never forgets where he came from and the people who put him there. One who knows the community inside out. An 'effective MPP' is one who goes back into his community and faces his peers after his tenure at Queen's Park."

As an experienced veteran, serving in her 5th parliamentary session, Elizabeth Witmer MPP of Kitchener-Waterloo, described an 'effective MPP' as "one who is happy with what they are doing. One must work hard every day, maintain balance in life, be knowledgeable of issues of the day, and be responsive to the people they are serving. Serving the constituents should be considered first and foremost." This response clearly indicates that the significance of constituency concerns does not decline with the number of years spent at Queen's Park.

As Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Michael Chan MPP of Markham, stated, "Years of experience in politics does not automatically translate to seniority in caucus, although they are valued. There is something to be said for someone who has dedicated so many years to this kind of public service. However, we are all colleagues and do our utmost to listen to one another— as we all offer different perspectives."

As someone who had been a rookie MPP for a period of eight months, Paul Ferreira, former MPP of York South-Weston said, "An effective MPP is one who can draw attention to an issue and effect change with that legislation. Someone who can assist constituents get through red tape and bureaucracy, who stands up and gets noticed, bringing important issues to the attention of the media and government of the day." It can then be argued that an experienced veteran MPP would have a more familiar understanding of the bureaucracy, allowing them to manoeuvre through the 'red tape' with more ease.

It was interesting to note that while MPPs associated 'effectiveness' primarily with the connectedness with constituents, those from outside the legislature (i.e. local media, lobbyists, and stakeholders) having direct relationships with members held a slightly varied perspective on what principally defines an 'effective MPP'. Chris Benedetti has a strong presence at Queen's Park as a senior lobbyist of a government relations firm, The Sussex Strategy Group, briefing members on matters of significant importance to the interests of their clients, often finding ways to assess how those issues/concerns affect the interests of the MPPs, and building an atmosphere of reciprocity. He stated that, "an effective MPP is one who debates often in the Legislature; is engaged with local and broader

stakeholders; and is involved in aiming to address/resolve issues/make changes by tabling and getting engaged in introducing new legislation. Years of experience in politics absolutely define seniority levels in caucus, which then in turn affects how effective an MPP can be."

In response to this same interview question, Jim Coyle, *Toronto Star* Public Affairs columnist, wrote:

Most are solid citizens who arrive ready to work, eager to make a difference, aware of the responsibility and rarely, if ever, with the notion of feathering their nests. They need to be many things – part idealist, masochist, bulldog, part cynic, part charmer. They need to be generalists who can pass as fluent on any issue at a moment's notice. They need to treat every constituent as if his or her problem were their biggest worry of the day. They need to know when to bark and when to purr to get files moved through the system and win attention for their concerns. In the riding, they need to be visible and available. They need to grow thick skins, big ears, keen eyes, acute antenna, while avoiding the slightest impropriety under almost constant scrutiny. Many leave saying they wouldn't have missed the experience for the world. But that they wouldn't repeat it on a bet. Frankly, you couldn't pay me enough.

Coyle is not alone in his opinions of the challenging, time-pressured lifestyle of all MPPs. A majority of the MPPs interviewed admitted to the lack of control of their own lives and schedules. Fortunately for the rookie MPPs, there is an orientation process for all rookie MPPs at the Ontario Legislature, assisting them to ease into their new demanding lifestyles and responsibilities. While a number of the rookie MPPs who either had previous political experience or exposure through their partisan involvement were familiar with the legislative process and felt no surprises of the legislative process, all rookie MPPs interviewed shared the same overwhelming feeling of being 'thrown immediately into the deep-end'.

Rookie MPP backbenchers, like Laura Albanese (MPP for York South-Weston) and Helena Jaczek, have valued the initial learning period which has allowed them to become more familiar and comfortable with the institutional structure, their ministry responsibilities, and what it takes to be an 'effective MPP'. Unlike them, a couple of rookie Liberal MPPs did not have quite the same advantage, as they were almost immediately sworn into cabinet with ministry responsibilities. According to Ms Jaczek, it is a huge mistake to put a rookie MPP into cabinet especially with the position's steep learning curve, believing that at least a year of exposure is necessary in order to establish full comfort

and confidence.

On this point, Mr. Coyle said:

The vast majority could benefit from a period learning about the legislature, its history and procedures. Some, by dint of native intelligence, private-sector experience or ability to learn fast and think on their feet, can handle a ministry right out of the gate....It is almost impossible to appreciate its frustrations and understand its workings until you're there.

His opinion is shared by many of those whom I spoke with who either had a direct relationship with the legislature, were former MPPs or cabinet ministers themselves, even some of the rookie MPP backbenchers themselves. The varied responses to this question demonstrate that the personal traits and characteristics, ambition and inspiration, and the relationships established as a result of constituent-connectedness all play significant factors in the success of an 'effective MPP' – and this is recognized by everyone, whether veteran or rookie within the political arena. With respect to the question I was addressing of what defined an MPP's 'effectiveness', I determined that 'effectiveness' involved a combination of an MPP's connectedness with their constituents and the voice they then relay on within the legislature (regardless of how many years they may have been involved in politics), a strong vision for the future of a better Ontario, as well as whether a MPP was a minister/backbencher on the government side or on the opposition side. In a legislature of 107 members, it is more difficult to have a noticeably changing effect, specifically if you are not with the government of the day. Whether the initial ambitions and inspirations of these MPPs inevitably change over the course of their time in politics is a question that is addressed next.

The Art of Balancing Priorities

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa*, noted academic scholar David C. Docherty writes about the sentiments felt by first time politicians heading to Ottawa to become Members of Parliament working on the Hill:

Most rookie MPs arrive in Ottawa hoping to affect change, thinking that their participation in the political progress can make a difference. After a few months, they realize that optimism and good ideas are not sufficient. Cabinet, caucus, party discipline, and strong hierarchical leadership interview with their plans to unfailingly represent their constituents and supporters. Yet, like Mr. Smith, they find other things about their job as a politician that brings them pleasure, such as the satisfaction of providing one-on-one constituency help to people in their riding or procuring government services for the entire constituency.³

First-time politicians enter Parliament with the initial belief and confidence that they are capable of overcoming any challenges, being a strong voice for their constituents and effecting change, only to be faced with the reality of bureaucratic barriers, evidently resulting in their attention being primarily focused on meeting the short-term needs of their constituents, versus effecting long-term changes at the policy level. Having worked in the capacity of both a reporter and columnist at Queen's Park for 30 years, Jim Coyle has covered four provincial elections, witnessed all three major parties – PCs, Liberals, and New Democrats – in power, and has watched a half-dozen different premiers in office. With the opportunity to compare and contrast approaches and management styles, he has had the advantage of observing what has seemed to be constant in the experience regardless of the era or party in power. He said:

Far and away the majority of candidates run for admirable reasons. In most instances they are local leaders who want to improve their communities and give voice to their constituents. Sometimes, it is the logical step up from municipal government. Sometimes, they have got active as a school trustee or education activist. Sometimes, they are motivated by a specific issue that has engaged or enraged them and there are led here by passion or anger. Sometimes they are determined merely to unseat a party in power that they dislike.

I began all my interviews with a question that would help me identify the driving force behind a representative group of MPPs who were successfully elected into public office: 'How would you describe the defining moment at which point you determined you were ready to run for office? What were your initial inspirations and ambitions? Has that changed since Day One?' A common theme emerged on how overwhelmed and humbled the MPPs were at the realization of the large responsibility they had taken upon themselves on behalf of their constituents. After the October 2007 provincial election, regardless of whether one was a rookie or veteran MPP, all MPPs were starry-eyed and optimistic; excited for the opportunity to serve their constituents and be a part (or continue to be a part) of Ontario's history. Most rookie MPPs explained their inspirations for wanting to be an elected official in their inaugural speech at the legislature: an important occasion where new Members have the opportunity to demonstrate their public-speaking skills in front of fellow Members, as well as talk about their constituents and thank those who helped them during their campaign period.

Two rookie MPPs in particular struck me as obvious

representatives of how energetic, excited and optimistic the other rookie MPPs entering government felt upon becoming elected officials: Sophia Aggelonitis (MPP Hamilton Mountain) and Yasir Naqvi. Aside from being rookie MPPs, another connection they share is that both were inspired to enter politics as a result of their family background and the significance placed on giving back and contributing to the Canadian society instilled in them at a very young age. When Ms Aggelonitis' parents emigrated to Canada in 1960, becoming a Canadian citizen was most important to them. "At the defining age of 8, on a cold October voting day, while walking to the polling stations and pulling a normal 8 year old tantrum, my father turned to me and said, 'no daughter of mine is not going to vote.'" With the strong support of her family and friends (including her predecessor, Marie Boutrogianni) behind her, Ms Aggelonitis, like any other MPP at Queen's Park, has the ambition to be a strong voice for the people of her riding. When asked what three issues she was planning on addressing during her time at Queen's Park, she responded, "Investment in Hamilton, job creation, business and economic development, every Hamilton child should have the opportunity for education at McMaster University; Health and Long-term care for seniors; Education and social service."

Similarly inspired into politics by family, Mr. Naqvi's family has a history of being political, having been involved in the pro-democracy movement in Pakistan. Like his fellow member, Mr. Naqvi also believes that it is a matter of civic duty to be involved in partisan politics, and always knew he was going to run for office. He had three fundamental issues he intends to work on, all which are constituency based: "1) addressing community safety (drugs and violence), brothels, and drug houses; 2) affordable housing – creating healthy communities. Bring in more funding and resources; 3) Public transit – greening our community, encouraging light rail public transit project."

While these are the ambitions and inspirations driving rookie MPP backbenchers, I thought it would be interesting to get the perspective on top priorities from a government cabinet minister in particular. Serving not only as a first-time politician, but also a rookie cabinet minister, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Michael Chan (MPP Markham), was initially inspired into politics with the intention of making a difference in the lives of people living in Ontario. More specifically, as a newcomer himself, he is interested in lessening the challenges faced by other newcomers. "My own first-hand experiences have put a lot into perspective and have aided me greatly in

driving my own ministry's initiatives." As Minister, some of the fundamental issues and challenges he wishes to address while in cabinet primarily involve expanding opportunity for Ontarians. The overarching themes to be addressed are: "investment in the skills and education of our people, investments in infrastructure, and investment/support of innovation, lower business costs, and strengthening key partnerships to maximize Ontario's potential."

A Liberal 'through and through', Ms Jaczek is unlike several of the MPPs I interviewed who were primarily drawn into politics due to their own family's background and involvement.

"It is totally political for me. My ambition is to get into cabinet and focus on an area. There is no specified burning issue that I want to target at the moment. I plan on spending my first year in office gaining a firm understanding of the house process and how legislation is enacted. I intend to do this by immersing myself into the process and volunteering at all opportunities to speak in the house."

Instead Ms Jaczek was motivated by her own partisan sentiments against the Mike Harris government of 1995. Connecting with Premier McGuinty in 2001, who had expressed a desire for recruiting more professionals in his government, Ms Jaczek wanted to have a contributing role in a centrist government. Acknowledging her own ambitions, she was not alone in admitting that there was a competitive atmosphere within the caucus, to become a cabinet minister someday. When asked his opinion on some of the challenges rookies MPPs face when entering Queen's Park for the first time, Chris Benedetti commented, "Sometimes it is challenging in working with rookie MPPs when they have not fully come to understand the role that they play in government, and the influence they can have on shaping policy. Often new MPPs are also only focused on the few issues/concerns that helped them get elected. It takes time for them to gain an appreciation for broader public policy issues."

Outside Perspectives on 'Rookie' MPPs

While the initial MPP inspirations addressed in the previous section are admirable, it begs the question whether these inspirations and issue priorities alter over time for MPPs depending on the length of their tenure spent at Queen's Park. When posing the same question as to whether initial ambitions and aspirations change, Mr. Coyle's response was:

As to how MPPs change over the course of their years, alas, they do. What is so charming about the maiden speeches rarely lasts long. They find how little power an ordinary member has

and how difficult it is to get things done. It is impossible to count the number of MPPs who have come to learn, as power has gravitated relentlessly over the last quarter-century away from the legislature and from elected members to the premier's office and unelected backroomers, how little influence they wield. Many have left frustrated and disillusioned.

A staffer in the Chief Government Whip's office, Carol Price, stated her opinion on whether initial ambitions and issue prioritizations change over the course of time that a member is in the legislature, from the time they are first elected:

Members come here thinking they can effect change, whether it is a change in their community or on a province-wide issue. They soon realize that change isn't that simple, but you can at least be a voice for your constituents. Members soon learn how the place operates; that things don't happen overnight. Change is a slow process, with its system of checks and balances. Every member soon realizes that first and foremost, you are responsible to the constituents who voted you in here.

With these quotes in mind, it made sense to ask the same question to an MPP who was experienced, had served as a constituency representative for over a number of years, and had gained a familiarity, an understanding and an appreciation of the legislative system and its slow changing process. With an ambition to become Ontario's first woman premier, issues that Elizabeth Witmer MPP for Kitchener-Waterloo focused on during the 1990s included the slipping economy, job loss and opportunities, education, and bringing health services closer to home:

The prioritizations of the issues I address have not changed since the 1990s; the issues themselves have not changed. Graduating students still struggle to find employment in Ontario; there are still long hospital waits and doctor shortages. My approach may have been modified with the success I've enjoyed in these years – a result of good staff, stakeholder relations, and through working in collaboration with all 3 parties for the betterment of Ontario.

One change to note is the trend for rookie MPPs to hail from a varied pool of professions: law, banking, business, engineering, and the list goes on. I observed that MPPs no longer held previous political experience (i.e. municipal councilor or school trustee) as was seen to be the case with veteran MPPs who generally had some political experience prior to entering provincial politics as an elected official. David Docherty made a similar observation when referring to politicians entering politics at the federal level. It was noted that one would not survive at Capital Hill without prior experi-

ence at the provincial level. MPP Paul Miller was in agreement with this theory, stating that "it is important to have experience in municipal politics (either as a school trustee or city councilor) before entering provincial politics – otherwise you've led a sheltered life. You must have walked a mile in the shoes of another man to really understand and know what's going on." Price begged to differ on this point. When transitioning into caucus, one does not require previous political experience. In fact Carol Price has observed that, "it could possibly be harder to adjust into provincial caucus if you've had previous municipal experience. While you're running a one-man show in municipal politics, you're a provincial team member here. The air is different here at Queen's Park."

There are a number of apparent transitions that have occurred within the culture and life at Queen's Park over the past few decades. Ontario has experienced a recurring pattern of large sweeps. A Liberal majority in 1987, an NDP majority in 1990, a PC majority in 1995; then after eight years of Tory rule, two Liberal minorities in 2003 and 2007. Electoral sweeps usually mean that MPPs get elected for the first time as government members, imposing instant constraints and robbing them of the valuable experience and the comparative liberty of opposition." Change of government is not only associated with changing 'fresh' policy ideas and energy, but also comes with new attitudes, relationships, patterns and trends established. For rookie Minister Chan, however, the one changing effect time has had on his attitude towards his priorities, is that his view of politics and his responsibilities have become firmer. As Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, he has met many of Ontario's newcomers. "These interactions are constant reminders of who our government is working for – and what we are working for." Another apparent shift in the evolution of Queen's Park culture is the changing attitudes, personalities, and relationships between reporters and politicians, and even among MPPs from different parties. In previous years, the atmosphere was much more collegial in the opinion of several veteran MPPs including Frances Lankin.

A huge impact on all MPPs, new ones too, has been the significant shrinkage over my years here in the size of the Queen's Park press gallery. The gallery is now much more Toronto-driven and has far fewer members. In my opinion, a great deal has been lost. When I have spoken to new MPPs, they seem almost shocked that a reporter will even approach them. It was much more collegial. It was not uncommon at all for reporters and MPPs from all parties to sit around the large table in the press gallery lounge drinking beer and telling stories after hours.

Newcomers were expected to be quiet and listen. It was a wonderful way to learn the culture and institutional history of the place.

Since the election of the more ideological governments in 1990 and 1995, all parties seem to have retreated into their own separate camps, with far less collegiality among parties and adversarial sentiments and suspicions felt cross-parties and with the press gallery.

Conclusion

So how has good governance in Ontario been influenced by the presence of new 'rookie' MPPs within the legislature? Common trends and theories that emerged from my qualitative research include the shifting nature of the relationships among MPPs (between those in the government party vying for a role in cabinet office, and suspicions amongst the parties, as well as towards the press gallery). What was once a cordial 'old-boys club' is slowly turning into a battleground, with all MPPs fighting for recognition and power. Another identifiable theme is the movement of veteran MPPs who have successfully established their reputation in their riding amongst their constituents tend to focus more on effecting long-term policy changes at Queen's Park, versus rookie MPPs who have yet to gain the trust and confidence of their constituents, requiring more of a warm-up period in which they initially focus primarily on meeting the short-term needs of their community.

When asked the final interview question of what advice could be given to today's youth who aspire to become tomorrow's leaders, a common response was to remain connected and heavily involved with community events and the one's constituents. Connectivity remains a fundamental component for any good governance. For the purposes of my paper, I determined that a balance was held as rookie MPPs brought in the importance for maintaining a rejuvenated, enthusiastic connection with their regional constituents, and veteran MPPs – who on the other hand, ensure that long-term effective policy goals are addressed as well for an improved lifestyle for all Ontarians. In the end, it's a fine balance towards a better Ontario.

Notes

1. David Pond, "The Role of the Backbencher – Current Issue Paper 103," Legislative Research Services, Ontario Legislative Library, July 1995, p.1.
2. Rookie MLAs interviewed for this article include:
 - Sophia Aggelonitis: (Liberal, Hamilton Mountain);
 - Laura Albanese: (Liberal, York South-Weston);
 - Michael Chan: (Liberal, Markham);
 - Helena Jaczek: (Liberal, Oak Ridges-Markham);
 - Amrit Mangat: (Liberal, Mississauga-Brampton South);
 - Yasir Naqvi: (Liberal, Ottawa Centre);
 - Charles Sousa: (Liberal, Mississauga South);
 - Paul Miller: (New Democratic Party, Hamilton East-Stoney Creek);
 - Sylvia Jones: (Progressive Conservative, Dufferin-Caledon);
 - Peter Shurman: (Progressive Conservative, Thornhill);
 - France Gelinis: (New Democratic Party, Nickel Belt);
 - Bob Bailey: (Progressive Conservative Party, Sarnia).Others interviewed include:
 - Paul Ferreira: Former MPP of York South-Weston;
 - Elizabeth Witmer: Veteran - MPP (1990 – Present);
 - Frances Lankin: Veteran - Former MPP (Beaches-Woodbine 1990 - 2001), New Democratic Party;
 - Carol Price: Political Staffer in the office of the Chief Government Whip of the Liberal Party;
 - Chris Benedetti: Lobbyist, Government Relations firm, the Sussex Strategy Group;
 - Jim Coyle: Provincial Affairs Columnist, *Toronto Star*.
3. David C. Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa*, UBC Press: Vancouver, 1997.

Most interviews were approximately 45 – 60 minutes. If interviewees were unable to accommodate a face-to-face dialogue session, they emailed in their responses. All questions were emailed to the interviewees in advance of the session. My interview requests were unanswered by a few rookie MPP offices, and I was directly refused an interview by only one office.