
Member of Parliament: A Job With No Job Description

Alison Loat

This article is based on a larger study that used exit interviews with former MPs to determine, among other things, how the MPs described their jobs. The study found that there is little consistency in the ways our elected members viewed the job description of an MP, and outlined five broad and overlapping categories. It also suggests certain implications that flow from the absence of any shared understanding of the MP's job.

Sixty-five former MPs were interviewed for this project in 2009-10. They served in public life for an average of 10 years, and left during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments, which sat from 2004 to 2008. Each MP served in at least one minority Parliament. Many came to Ottawa at a particular point in our political history: when the Bloc Québécois, the Reform Party and later the merged Conservative Party of Canada became as important players on the national stage.¹

When asked to describe the role of an MP and how they thought about the job, there were nearly as many responses as there were MPs.

We were surprised that the former MPs interviewed lacked a shared understanding of the job's key components, responsibilities and expectations. For example, two-thirds of them spent at least a portion of their time in Ottawa on the opposition benches, so it came as a surprise that only a few mentioned holding a government accountable as part of their job.

A similarly small number mentioned engaging the public in determining the policies that shape our country and communities. Even those who defined their role as representing constituents were unlikely to talk of such engagement.

*Alison Loat is co-founder and executive director of Samara, a charitable organization whose programs work to strengthen Canada's democracy. Samara is midway through preparing a series of reports based upon systematic exit interviews with Canadian Members of Parliament. The first report, *The Accidental Citizen*, outlined the backgrounds of participating MPs and how they ultimately decided to run for office. The second report is *Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*. For the full text of the report visit www.samaracanada.com/welcome_to_parliament.*

It is important to look at this in context. Unlike traditional professions — and indeed unlike the vast majority of jobs across the country — which come with generally accepted and agreed upon responsibilities and codes of conduct, there is no job description for a Member of Parliament.

Theory and Practice

The Westminster system of government, on which the Canadian Parliament is based, has three traditional roles. The first is to consider, refine and pass legislation. In other words, to establish policy and pass laws.

The second is to hold government accountable for its administration of the laws and to authorize the expenditure of required funds. That is, to ensure that the laws are being carried out properly, and that tax dollars are being spent responsibly.

The third role is to determine the life of the government by providing or withholding support. This means to vote for things you support, and against things you do not support.

Today's MPs perform a variety of roles in addition to those outlined above. Most notably, they are also responsible for the constituency and party duties that have emerged with a growing population, a larger Parliament and the evolution of Canada's party system.² As it turns out, modern politics and political life are much more complicated than the classic Westminster description suggests.

Perhaps as a result of this growing complexity, there was little consistency in the ways the Members of Parliament described the essential purpose of an MP or how they balanced the competing aspects of the role.

We were surprised that none of the MPs in our group described their jobs in terms consonant with this traditional Westminster definition—only a few were even close.

One MP was brave enough to acknowledge that he was not entirely sure what the job entailed. “I thought one should have a clear understanding of what an MP does. But even when I explained it to people, I did not entirely know...and when I asked others, I did not get a clear answer.”

When we asked MPs to describe how they conceived of their role, five general categories emerged, and each included substantial degrees of difference within it. The wide disparity in the way MPs described their own jobs is echoed by Professor Suzanne Dovi, “The concept of political representation is misleadingly simple: everyone seems to know what it is, yet few can agree on any particular definition.”³

The Philosophers

Many of the MPs to whom we spoke described their role in ways that correlated with two classic competing definitions of a political representative’s role: what political scientists refer to as trustees (representatives who follow their own understanding of the best action to pursue) and delegates (representatives who follow the expressed preferences of their constituents).

Unlike the other groups described in this report, the philosophers’ views on the role of an MP correlated somewhat with political affiliation. There was no clear majority of trustees or delegates among Parliamentarians from the Liberals, New Democrats or the Bloc Québécois. Each of those parties had MPs in both groups. Yet while several Conservative MPs described themselves as trustees, the overwhelming majority indicated that they approached their role as delegates.

The majority of MPs who defined their roles in philosophical terms described themselves as trustees, elected by the public to use their own judgment in making decisions. One Liberal claimed, “I am not there as some kind of thoughtless representation of local views. Voters have chosen me and I have to apply my best judgment to the situation. It may not always be popular with the constituents, but if they wanted a popularity contest or poll, they would not need an MP.”

A New Democrat described it this way, “My job as an MP was to do the thinking and the listening at the committee hearings and the meetings — albeit out of a certain perspective that I was up-front about when I ran — and then to make judgments. My constituents will hold me accountable at elections and in between with their input with letters of criticism or support.”

A smaller number of MPs described themselves as delegates, viewing their role as the representatives of their constituents above all else. “They select you to be their representative in Ottawa, to speak for them, to vote on legislation and, in some cases, to develop legislation that they feel is wanted. Basically to work for their interests and to deliver for them whatever benefits might flow,” said one Conservative MP. “MPs should be in Ottawa to represent their constituents,” said a Liberal MP.

Others described themselves primarily as delegates, but expanded the description beyond simply representing their constituents’ views. “The purpose of an MP is to facilitate the opportunity for the people who you represent to be engaged in the public enterprise,” one MP said.

A common view described the purpose of an MP not as a trustee or a delegate, but as someone whose job it was to balance the two.

Several described the tension between reflecting constituents’ views and leading the way towards or developing a broader view. “My job was to provide leadership. Not just to reflect the discussion, but also to lead the discussion,” said one Liberal MP. “I knew I had to represent the voices of my constituents whether I agreed or not... but it did not mean I championed those causes,” said a New Democrat.

At times, the MPs expressed resentment for colleagues who viewed the role differently. One MP suggested that those who viewed themselves solely as delegates did not fully appreciate their job. “You are not running for councillor. You are not the alderman here. You are the ambassador to Ottawa.”

Others expressed similar resentment toward those who failed to stay close to those who elected them. “I have seen too many people change. You go to Ottawa, and you are the guy next door, and then you come home and you are an important person who does not know anybody,” one MP said. Another argued that MPs quickly fall out of touch with their communities and begin to believe their own rhetoric. “Politicians have become too removed from their own constituents,” he declared.

The Geographers

For a second group of MPs, the role was described principally in terms of a balance or choice between advancing local or national interests.

Some MPs felt a Parliamentarian’s emphasis should be on the entire country. “The job is coming up with

rules that govern our society. Primarily we need to look at it from a Canada-wide perspective. I know it is important to represent your constituents and your province, but I think you have to think about what is happening throughout the whole country.”

Another MP was even more forceful on this point. “I think what I am really doing is calling upon voters to... rise above the merely self-interested and local, and think more broadly about what they want for their families, their provinces and the values they want their country to represent,” she said.

Other MPs argued that their attention should be on representing local perspectives. “MPs should be in Ottawa to represent their constituents,” one MP said. “I think it is our job— and I always said this — it is my job to bring the voice of the people to Ottawa and stand up for what we have here,” explained another MP.

Others articulated it as a balance, although one that was often difficult to find. “It is a challenge to find a balance... You serve a national interest if you are sitting in Parliament, but you also serve local interests, which is the whole beauty in our system of having constituencies. You are accountable to the country as a whole, but also very specifically to the electors that put you in that office. MPs are driven by both those things.”

This was particularly the case for MPs in cabinet and party leadership positions, roles that forced them to adapt their initial conceptions of where an MP’s focus should be. Some enjoyed the challenge in this, but for others it exacerbated the tensions already inherent in the role of an MP.

“I believe to the core... that the principal purpose of an MP is to represent constituents... It was more difficult when I became the party leader because I occupied two roles simultaneously, one of which took you away from your constituents a lot,” one political party leader explained.

A cabinet minister expressed a similar sentiment, “The purpose of the MP is to represent, to the best of their ability, the interests of their constituents,” the minister said, before adding that this definition did not accord with her cabinet experience. “There the focus was on the country.”

For some, this was an invigorating challenge. “Part of the job is to try and build the threads that hold the country together... you have got to try and encourage people to be bigger than they think they can be in terms of spirit and vision.”

For others, the balance was so difficult as to be nearly impossible. “The purpose of an MP is — and our slogan was — to be our riding’s voice in Ottawa,

not Ottawa’s voice in our riding. That is what an MP is. And that is in direct conflict with the role of cabinet,” the MP said.

The Partisans

The variety of these descriptions was compounded by a third group of MPs that went beyond the trustee/delegate or national/local divisions to emphasize an additional purpose: representing the views of one’s political party. Even so, each described this obligation differently.

Some felt the party and the constituents were the primary groups to balance. “The purpose of an MP is to be a leader from your community in the national affairs of the country. On the one hand, you should be listening to the people you represent, and that means whoever is in the community and not just the people who voted for you... One the other hand, you have campaigned on your party’s programs and issues and so you also have an obligation to that,” said one MP.

Others felt that their role was to balance the interests of the country with those of the political party. “I can give you the canned thing of why they tell us we are there and I can share with you what I believe is the truth. In a nutshell, we are there to adopt national policy for the betterment of all in the country. The truth is, you are there to develop policy that is beneficial to your party in order to keep you in power and get you re-elected. That national premise is, kind of, always there, but there is politics involved in everything,” the MP said.

An understanding that re-election was also part of the role was echoed more broadly in other MPs’ remarks as well. “You want to win your seat, because if your party wins enough seats, it will be asked to form the government,” said one. “You have to do what you have to do to get re-elected,” said another.

Others described a different balance still, framing the role as one that required navigating among obligations to one’s constituents, political party and party leader. One described it as a hierarchy, “An MP’s first purpose is to serve his constituents... Second, whether you like it or not, you belong to a team. I think your loyalty to the values and principles of that political entity are important. Third, I think, is loyalty to the leader,” the MP said. For others, it was more straightforward. “You have a mandate to try and implement the things your party ran on,” declared another MP.

The Service Providers

A fourth set of descriptions came from MPs who characterized the job as a combination of developing public policy — whether national or regional in its

Participating Former MPs

Hon. Peter Adams	Hon. Roy Cullen	Hon. Paul Macklin
Hon. Reginald Alcock	Odina Desrochers	The Rt. Hon. Paul Martin
Omar Alghabra	Hon. Paul DeVillers	Bill Matthews
Hon. David Anderson	Hon. Claude Drouin	Alexa McDonough
Hon. Jean Augustine	Hon. John Efford	Hon. Anne McLellan
Hon. Eleni Bakopanos	Ken Epp	Gary Merasty
Hon. Susan Barnes	Brian Fitzpatrick	Hon. Andrew Mitchell
Colleen Beaumier	Paul Forseth	Pat O'Brien
Catherine Bell	Sébastien Gagnon	Hon. Denis Paradis
Stéphane Bergeron	Hon. Roger Galloway	Hon. Pierre Pettigrew
Hon. Reverend William Blaikie	Hon. John Godfrey	Russ Powers
Alain Boire	James Gouk	Penny Priddy
Ken Boshcoff	Hon. Bill Graham	Werner Schmidt
Hon. Don Boudria	Raymond Gravel	Hon. Andy Scott
Hon. Claudette Bradshaw	Art Hanger	Hon. Carol Skelton
Hon. Edward Broadbent	Jeremy Harrison	Hon. Monte Solberg
Bonnie Brown	Luc Harvey	Hon. Andrew Telegdi
Hon. Sarmite Bulte	Hon. Loyola Hearn	Myron Thompson
Marlene Catterall	Hon. Charles Hubbard	Hon. Paddy Torsney
Roger Clavet	Dale Johnston	Randy White
Hon. Joseph Comuzzi	Hon. Walt Lastewka	Blair Wilson
Guy Côté	Marcel Lussier	

focus — and working in the more direct services to constituents. Direct service provision includes assisting constituents with a wide variety of casework, such as questions about immigration, employment insurance, passports and veterans' support, helping constituents benefit from federal programs or legislation and fulfilling a representative role by attending social occasions or other commemorative events.⁴

Most MPs recognized that both policy and constituent service work were important, but clearly articulated that one was more important than the other. "I was not motivated by constituency work," said one MP, adding that most of it was handled by his riding office staff. Others described the riding-level work as the most important part of the job. "You are the ombudsmen. When there is a federal problem, you are the go-to-guy. You are the one that they look to for help because if you cannot help them, who can? You either help or put them in touch with someone who can. You listen to their problem," another MP explained.

Whether one's riding was urban or rural also influenced how MPs chose between local service and policy work. Many MPs from rural ridings, for example, emphasized

that constituents expected them to be present in their riding, focusing on local concerns. "My first riding was 20 percent rural, and they were much more demanding. They want their MPs at everybody's 40th birthday celebration... I did not miss it when they redistributed my riding and it became a totally urban riding. The demands from the rural constituents, socially, were as heavy as from the urban 80 percent."

Several MPs observed that, given the demands placed on rural MPs by their constituents, there was little in common between urban and rural MPs. One MP from a rural riding described them as two different jobs. "When we go to Ottawa we are all the same, but in the riding, a rural MP has to be very people-oriented. In a big city riding, people do not know their MP, and they often do not even know which riding they are in," one MP said. He then recalled an urban colleague describing the difficulty of getting to several constituent events in one evening. "I said, 'It is hard getting around? For God's sake, I can walk across your riding faster than I can fly across mine.'"

MPs were often quite forceful about where a Parliamentarian's emphasis should be. One urban MP was

sympathetic to the demands of his rural colleagues, but nonetheless stressed that the role in Ottawa was the most important. "To do your duty in a rural riding, you cannot be an absentee MP. But the job is in Ottawa, ultimately, and that is what they pay you for," the MP said.

A few were hostile to the emphasis placed on constituency service. One called the work "distasteful." Another felt it was "a sidebar... It is repetitive problems. It takes less skill to actually operate the constituency office... a lot of it can be done by your staff — 80 to 85 percent," the MP said.

Yet another MP was even more direct on this point. "People elect you to be in Parliament. They do not elect you to schmooze with them in the constituency... This whole constituency thing becomes, I worry, a kind of substitute for real input and activity," the MP said.

Some MPs were reluctant to place too strong an emphasis on policy. "I did not want to be a high-faluting MP," one said, adding that his primary focus was on his constituency. "If you forget your roots, they will forget you."

Others felt no such tension. "I thought of my role this way: In the riding, I am dealing with the law as it now stands; in Ottawa, the role was future-oriented. How things could be changed, how things could be improved," she said.

The "None-of-the-Abovers"

The final group of MPs described their roles with language that did not fit into the above-mentioned categories, using more colloquial descriptions that made little or no reference to definitions of representation or to their political party. These descriptions ranged from platitudes to personal observations, from inspiring statements of purpose to definitions that bordered on the absurd.

One described his role as a means of professional advancement. "The MP's role is an opportunity for useful, intelligent people to have a good time... You have such a variety of different things to do... You can talk to anyone, you can learn anything. Some people describe it as the best graduate degree in the world."

There were others who described it as advancing a vision, or wider change. "Your purpose is to advance the public interest... it boils down to working with your colleagues to advance the prosperity of the people."

Another set regarded the role as a call to service. "Being an MP is not a job, it is a calling, a way of life. You are one of the lucky people to ever get there," one MP said. "I think the role should be thought of

as a professional service honour. Public service is something that can be very good for the country," said another.

Other MPs, reflecting their particular variation of an outsider self-identification, described a core aspect of their role as bringing their own personal identity into Parliament. One female MP, elected less than a decade after she had completed university, said that representing her demographic was central to her job. "I have a responsibility for broader representation and involvement with young people and women... I have an obligation to speak up," the MP said. Another proudly remembered, "I was the first Greek-born woman elected to the House of Commons... A lot of young women in the community saw me as a role model."

One Aboriginal described his role as being a conduit for his community. "They do not see you as a party member, they see you as you, and say, "Screw the political party affiliations, you better do what is good for our people," the MP said. A Bloc MP described his job as representing Québec internationally, and interacting with ambassadors of other countries. "Bloc MPs have a big role at the international level... as a representative of Québec."

A further group compared the role to a wide variety of other professions that had little in common, save perhaps for their heavy interaction with people. These professions included: administrator, doctor, priest, teacher, ambassador, social worker, messenger, spokesperson and lobbyist. One MP equated the role to that of a "guard dog."

Several who compared the role to other professions also made direct connections to their own pre-Parliamentary careers. One accountant and executive described the role as akin to running a small business. Another equated it with running two businesses. A lawyer and mediator said the role was about building relationships. "The whole story of Parliament is human relationships at the level of the MP. We do that in our daily life in our communities: we build relationships; we build networks."

Finally and perhaps surprisingly given the attention paid to Question Period in our country's politics, only a few MPs mentioned that the role involved holding government accountable for its decisions. "Collectively with colleagues, an MP must play a role as a watchdog of government activities, and ensure that the government pursues the public interests and spends money wisely," one MP said. Another lamented the sentiment that accountability was disappearing

and thought greater emphasis should be placed on it. “The House... as a place... to hold the government to account has to be rethought.”

Implications of the Survey

The immense variation in responses should give pause to anyone concerned with the political process. We had expected that MPs would be in general agreement as to why they are in Ottawa and what they are supposed to be doing there. Furthermore, Canadians should have an understanding of what to expect from their elected representatives. But it is clear that Parliamentarians do not have a shared conception of an MP's job description, which likely makes it difficult for the electorate to have a clear view either.

Further complicating this story is the fact that not all MPs enter politics for the same reasons. As discussed in *The Accidental Citizen?* our MPs come to politics with a wide variety of pre-Parliamentary backgrounds, careers and expressed motivations. In addition, some MPs belong to political parties — such as the New Democratic Party or the Bloc Québécois — that are unlikely to win enough seats to form a government. These MPs know their role will be as a member of the opposition benches, and this may influence their interpretation of an MP's essential purpose.

Since contemporary Canadian society is culturally, regionally, economically and politically diverse, some may argue that such varied descriptions of a MPs' role are inevitable. “It is a question that will be answered, probably, in as many different ways as there are Members of Parliament and will probably change with the historic development of the country,” one MP admitted.

No doubt the definition will evolve, but surely we can do better than the current inconsistent, and even contradictory, understanding of what an MP is supposed to do.

We believe there are reasons to worry about a Parliament whose members disagree so fundamentally on the basic aspects of the job, as well as on what they were elected to achieve.

First, if MPs are confused as to their job description, their ability to do their jobs effectively is diminished. When roles and responsibilities are not clear in any organization, problems ensue. Critical tasks will be overlooked, or efforts will be duplicated. Important work will not be achieved. Without clarity on who is in charge, and who is responsible to whom and for what, inter-personal tension is bound to result. These issues also tend to be amplified during times of war, economic uncertainty or technological or change — times that especially demand a clear-headed, well-

reasoned response from our elected leaders, even when the path forward is not immediately apparent.

Second, this reality confuses the media who observe Parliament and whose job it is to describe to Canadians how our country is being governed. Organizations whose leaders operate without a shared sense of purpose or responsibility are difficult to understand and explain. This challenge is only compounded by the reduction in journalistic resources devoted to the coverage of national affairs in news organizations across Canada.

Third, this lack of agreement about what MPs are supposed to be doing confuses the citizenry. This confusion results from impressions formed by the media's coverage of national politics, and from direct interaction with politicians whose views on their essential function are so widely divergent. Within the five groups we describe earlier — the philosophers, geographers, partisans, the service providers and none-of-the-abovers — the MPs spoke of tensions and outright disagreements with colleagues who held different perspectives. It is not hard to see how difficult it would be to work together effectively given such a wide variety of often competing priorities. If the MPs themselves are unable to describe their own role clearly and coherently, it is hard to blame the media or the public for not understanding it either, and by extension, not knowing what to expect from their elected leaders.

Finally, this lack of clarity of purpose can cause — and most certainly exacerbate — confusion, partisanship and a relentless focus on the short-term, and in particular, on the next election. These are, in short, the very qualities of contemporary Canadian politics that alienate so many citizens from politics and lead them to disengage from public life altogether.

Without an agreed-upon sense of purpose, measures of success will be equally unclear. In politics, this prompts Parliamentarians to fall back on what is the simplest and most immediate indication of success — getting re-elected. As most Canadians surely agree, as far as indicators of success go in public life, this is hardly satisfactory.

Should there be a Job Description?

If there should be a job description for MPs, how do we decide what it should include? And who should decide?

The definition of the MP's role should be an initial question in a wider discussion on the need to bring greater attention to Canadian politics and support to those who pursue it. The job is important. Symbolically,

Parliamentarians are the link between Canadians and their government; practically, they are responsible for developing and passing the laws and policies that help shape how Canadians live together. These processes matter and surely we can do better than the current state of affairs.

We hope this research will be a basis for further discussion and will contribute to a greater understanding of political leadership in Canada. The exit interview project stems from a belief that the system can be robust and elastic, but only to the extent that the wider citizenry is willing to engage with it, to understand both how it works and why it can fail to produce the results we may prefer or expect.

The ultimate goal of this research is to stimulate conversation about these issues among Canadians. Present members of Parliament have a unique perspective on the role of Parliamentarians across the country, and Samara would be interested in hearing from them. Are members of provincial parliaments

and legislative assemblies equally unclear about their role and purpose? Do some provinces have job descriptions for their parliamentarians?

Notes

1. Samara was able to conduct these interviews almost entirely in person, and often in the homes or communities of participating MPs, thanks to introductions from the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians. The former Parliamentarians generously gave their time, allowed interviews to be recorded and granted permission to use the information to advance public understanding of Canadian politics and political culture.
2. See The Parliament of Canada, "On the Job with a Member of Parliament" www2.parl.gc.ca/sites/lop/aboutparliament/onthejobmp/index-e.asp, accessed January 13, 2011.
3. See Suzanne Dovi, "Political Representation." From the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.
4. Adopted from the Parliamentary Centre's article "On the Front Lines: The New MP and Constituency Work."