
The Constituency Project Ten Years On

Peter MacLeod

Ten years ago an enterprising Ph.D candidate at the London School of Economics spent four months touring nearly 100 of Canada's federal constituency offices — what he calls perhaps “the country's most dramatic if accidental parliamentary reform” — in an attempt to better understand a political culture where voter participation and trust in government were on the decline. In this article Peter MacLeod reflects on some of the subtle insights he picked up during his journey and looks to future innovations. He concludes by asking if, in the digital age, new generations of MPs will be more inclined to think of their offices and local budgets in terms of open platforms for community building and learning.

In 2004, I returned to Canada after two years spent tracking the New Labour experiment from my post as a researcher at the London think tank, Demos. Though post-9/11, these were still heady, pre-recession days where the British government was on a spending tear, London was booming, and Anthony Giddens's call for Third Way politics still felt fresh.

I had, only a short time before, enrolled as a part-time student at the London School of Economics with a plan to get a Ph.D. Though I was what could only generously be called a Canadianist, I had managed to take just enough courses in architecture and urbanism to be admitted to the sociology department's cities program.

Now I needed a research project and though I had enrolled with a plan to leave Canadian politics far behind and make a home in this new discipline, I couldn't entirely shake a fashionable preoccupation with declining voter turnout and trust in government. It's what I knew. And truthfully, it's what I cared about.

Soon after, I came back to Canada to begin my fieldwork, having decided to travel as far as I could from official Ottawa. My plan was to explore the periphery

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Photos by Peter MacLeod

Peter MacLeod, pictured in Cambridge, Ontario, took a cross-country journey in 2004 which brought him to nearly 100 federal constituency offices as a part of his doctoral research into Canadian political culture.

of Parliament and spend four months visiting some of the loneliest outposts in politics, sitting as they do alongside laundromats and video stores. This was the beginning of the Constituency Project.

Ten years later, the absurdity and light-heartedness of the project are possibly what matter most. Over the course of four months, I drove the length and width of the country, visiting nearly 100 offices belonging to local MPs.



Each piece of paper pictured in these mugs represents a constituent phone call returned in this office.

The sample size was ridiculous. The same study could have been easily completed with four offices, maybe 10. But as an antidote to London and to theory, there was something honest and grounding about spending time with people who, while working for politicians, were themselves almost wholly apolitical. Their job, as they saw it, was simply to help other people. And so, happy in their company, I just kept going.

Of course, many of the offices were entirely unremarkable — but many more were a reliable source of subtle insights.

In Fredericton, I spent a morning learning how Andy Scott ingeniously packed local halls for his public meetings. In the Gaspé, I visited bustling Bloc offices. With little interest in parliamentary affairs, staff were sent to the ridings to work as local fix-its. If other parts of the country were baffled by the enduring local appeal of Stockwell Day, 10 minutes

with his staff in Penticton set the record straight. The same goes for Anne McLellan, then deputy Prime Minister, who was a renowned constituency MP. Her office was an impossible maze of filing cabinets containing tens of thousands of folders accumulated over a decade spent tending to the concerns of her Edmonton residents.

In Saskatoon, staff for Maurice Vellacott were proud to show off a recently outfitted RV that doubled as a mobile office. Jim Prentice was apparently so keen to simply talk with his constituents that he removed the desk from his private office, preferring just two wingback chairs.

Not surprisingly, staff for MPs like Libby Davies and Claudette Bradshaw made a specialty of social justice issues. John Godfrey's outpost on dreary Laird Road in east Toronto was nevertheless a magnet for urbane young staffers.

Every imaginable grievance passed through their doors: nasty child custody fights; accusations of workplace discrimination; decades-long battles to reunite distant families; shocking miscarriages of justice; and stories of intractable tax collectors run amok. Any new staffer would immediately find himself or herself swamped by the endless stream of employment insurance claims, missing passports, and neglected veterans.

More than once I heard assistants in grittier neighbourhoods compare their dingy storefronts to local emergency rooms. The urgency of their work didn't leave much time for ideology. As an office of last resort, constituency staff found themselves on the front line, too often stepping in when every other public service falls apart. And so they hustled for public housing, made referrals to legal aid, and kept pushing their carefully cultivated contacts in the line ministries to resolve a case.

Then came the litany of requests for endorsements of every cause, letters asking for all manner of worthy commendations and invitations to a groaning board of local pancake breakfasts and chicken dinners.

Tracking well below the quagmires and correspondence was the actual policy work – telegraphing back to Ottawa the pulse of local opinion. As a proportion of the total activities fielded by staff, the receipt of thoughtful, original letters from local constituents concerning upcoming bills in Parliament is so comparatively rare that their novelty is itself a source of influence. If only because a change is as good as a rest, a personal note to your MP will likely be read with interest and gratitude.

Fixer Politics

Canada is almost alone amongst democracies in the heavy emphasis we place on the local end of parliamentary work. Perhaps it's a consequence of the special contempt Canadians have for Ottawa, or a lingering provincialism that views with suspicion any talk of high politics. Regardless, today's MP has little choice but to prove they haven't lost touch, and join the weekly exodus from the Ottawa airport. Along with our American cousins, our political system could be truthfully said to run on jet fuel, possibly making

for one of the worst, most fatigue-inducing commutes yet conceived.

None of this was by design. In fact, the advent of constituency offices may be the country's most dramatic if accidental parliamentary reform – wholly reshaping the role of MPs and their relationship to Canadians.

The first office opened innocently enough: conveniently just a two hour drive from Ottawa, in Kingston. A recently elected Flora Macdonald wanted a way to keep in touch, and hired a Queen's student, paying his wage and the cost of a small office from her own salary.

Within the decade, a system of enhanced stipends and office budgets was introduced. The very MPs which Trudeau had infamously called 'a bunch of nobodies' 50 yards off the Hill now had a local taxpayer-funded stage of their own. It was a solution to a question no

one had thought to ask but which suddenly everyone wanted.

Today, the great English legislator, Edmund Burke, would have trouble recognizing either delegates or trustees among Parliament's many tribes. In their place, we have installed a system most properly described as 308 elected ombuds.

Whether stuck on the backbench and frozen out from the work of their leader's office, or else genuinely motivated by the chance to make a local difference, today's MPs occupy themselves in ways unimagined or unavailable to their Hill-bound predecessors.

Engaging Constituents

While MPs have been busy reinventing themselves as helpful fixers and responsive caseworkers, it appears paradoxically that this shift has done little to slow the decades old decline in public confidence for elected politicians.

Of course even the most diligent local fixer will only ever tend to the needs of a small slice of their constituency. As a high-touch strategy, it's a role that leaves little time for anything else, including pursuing larger agendas that might begin to address the structural issues that feed the demand for their services.

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It also obviates an even more direct good — proactively engaging residents in the work of parliamentary decision-making, and increasing public understanding of the issues and trade-offs that confront it.

This strategy might well be called, however unfashionably, adult education; but here we can imagine the MP as the lead learner navigating a mix of issues where too often there are no easy answers. Here too constituency offices might be used more profitably when treated as nodes on a network for a new style of civic programming. Is it inconceivable to imagine political parties coordinating speakers circuits, or other events with better production values than a typical townhall meeting, travelling the country?

Inevitably each MP must make choices — how they allocate their scarce time being the most important. It is an unenviable job, yet the task of representing and speaking for others remains an extraordinary and rare privilege. Asking for hepped-up programing in a constituency office to restitch the connection between politics and people might seem like a tall order.

Yet, the limits of fixer politics are also apparent. Rob Ford, perhaps Canada's uber-constituency politician, is an unsettling example of the fixer extreme, where every policy decision gets subsumed to a grotesque populism. Here you will get your call returned, and a city worker redirected to tamp down fresh asphalt at your curb, but the real work of governing and city-building goes undone.

Surely the fifth decade of constituency politics will provide an opportunity for fresh approaches. A new generation of young parliamentarians may well be more inclined to share their local and increasingly online stages, shifting away from the service model as more and more government services are delivered electronically and, on the whole, more seamlessly. As this happens, tomorrow's MPs may be more inclined

to think of their offices and local budgets as open platforms for community building and learning.

The humble MP's office remains Parliament's most malleable and low-risk site for civic innovation. It falls to the MPs of our next parliament to reimagine these stages for their own time.



From dense city cores to suburban strip malls to rural industrial areas, constituency offices assume different forms to suit their locales and the needs of the MP and local populations.