

Life After Parliament: The Role of Associations of Former Parliamentarians

At some point in time every current parliamentarian will become a former parliamentarian. In recent decades associations representing former parliamentarians have formed to provide transitional assistance to and maintain and foster social links that developed among these men and women during their time in legislatures. In this roundtable the Canadian Parliamentary Review brought together members of several provincial associations of former members who spoke of their organizations' work and how they might be able to offer their wealth of parliamentary experience to assist current research and outreach projects of legislatures.

Linda Asper, Rita Dionne-Marsolais, Clif Evans, Karen Haslam, Gilles Morin, Derwyn Shea and David Warner

CPR: When and why did your organizations form?

RDM: We date back to 1994. There was a big change in government and former parliamentarians wanted to keep in touch with each other. The purpose of the association is really to bring together former colleagues in a non-partisan entity where they can keep in touch and share experiences. And we also have recreated committees. We have a communications committee that publishes a bulletin twice a year. We also have a committee we call Objects of Memory that focuses on getting all the artifacts and all the documentation of former parliamentarians. The objective is to create archives that will allow research and will keep the

memories of these former members of the assembly. That's a pretty active committee. Since 1792, more than two thousand Quebec parliamentarians have participated in parliament. In 2002, when the committee was formed, there were only 180 archives. To fill that gap and to document the past of the history of the Quebecois parliamentarians Marcel Masse created a committee. It now contacts the parliamentarians when they leave office. Whether they're defeated or they just leave. They've increased the archives substantially. We also have a committee which developed an internet site where our members can send articles or comments and have access to information. We also have a confidential assistance program for former parliamentarians who might find themselves in difficulty. It exists for current parliamentarians but for the last five or six years it's been available for retired parliamentarians as well and it has proved helpful. And we have a committee that I chair called the parliamentarianism and democracy committee that keeps a relationship with other associations, including French-speaking associations in France and Belgium, and of course our Canadian counterparts.

CE: In 2001, the speaker contacted some former parliamentarians and put us together in a group. We organized at large kind of and made some appointments within ourselves. From 2001 until 2006, when we were legislated, we basically were trying

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Linda Asper

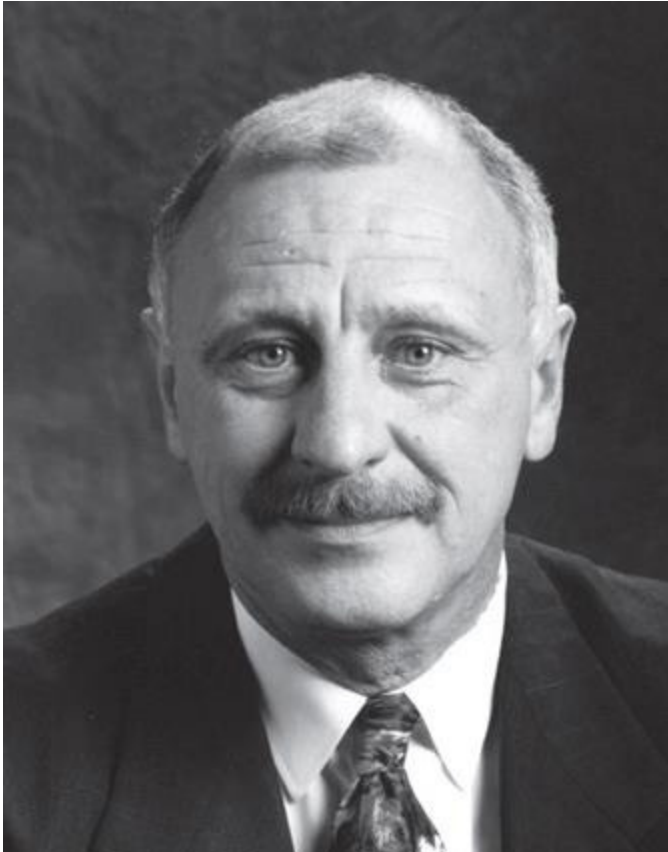
to get everybody involved. We sent out surveys and letters asking for input from former legislators about what they wanted to see in the organization. We were successful enough by 2006 to put everything together and we were legislated in 2006. There was an outreach around 2010 and that's when we came together with the other two provinces in 2011 for the first tripartite session. We developed a speakers program and a youth parliament program. I think since we became part of this tripartite group we've picked up many of our ideas from Quebec and Ontario: the legacy and service awards and a few others. Right now I think we're trying to promote more involvement among our former members.

LA: I wasn't involved in the beginning in a way Cliff was, but the law that was developed as a part of our creation included an item about liaison with current MLAs. In that light we invite them to everything we can and try to maintain a contact. We don't have any hostility that could exist. I remember when I was in caucus and the bill was first being discussed there was a feeling that this would be a rival group, but none



Rita Dionne-Marsolais

of that materialized so there's a good relationship there. And then, of course, promoting democracy in our province and programs, we thought of youth parliament. We also decided to have associate members who are the former members of parliament and that was very strategic in terms of increasing our membership because we don't have a large group the way you do in your two provinces (Ontario and Quebec). And it struck me last year, at one of the lunches; former MP Bill Blaikie remarked that this was such a wonderful group. It was his first time there and he said it made him feel like he was wanted. I think since he left politics he hadn't always felt that way. And that's true with other former members. It's very disconcerting when you phone one of these young staff members at the legislature and they don't know who you are. You used to be one of them. As Cliff mentioned, the distinguished service award is something we've done for two years in a row. The lunches that we organize are very popular and we're planning a legacy project and currently working to obtain funding.



Clif Evans

CE: We're in a difficult situation with Manitoba right now. Like Linda says with the funding...

LA: ...our budget is \$5000.

CE: Exactly, and we try to do all these things. It's tough because of the demographics of the province. Really, it's difficult to get people to come to our group sessions or our AGM or events. We have a good group of executive members and members at large, but because of our financial situation we can't reach out as well as we'd like.

LA: We're trying one outreach program and we were going to do it this past week but we postponed it to the spring to Brandon, which is a city about two and a half hours away. And we are going to have a program in Brandon once a year to try and do some outreach with our rural members. And hope that that will succeed.



Karen Haslam

DS: Your question was what got you started? Back in about 1995 or 1996 there had been a provincial election and a member of one of the parties was defeated and, in despair afterwards, committed suicide. I was outraged that there was no place where he could've gone for help. There was no support system. So I began to meet with various members in the house. In the course of these conversations, I began to realize that this was really something we needed to do – to find a place where former members could have a place where they could feel accepted and were identified and cared for – some kind of verbal and physical support. And so we began to work towards that end. Eventually legislation was established around the year 2000. It was sponsored by all three parties so it went through very quickly in the house. I think this might have been the first time all three parties have agreed on one piece legislation. The OAFP ensures that services will be provided and will respond to people who are having some challenges. Case and point, there was a member of one party who called me at three in the morning and was on the verge of suicide. I simply had

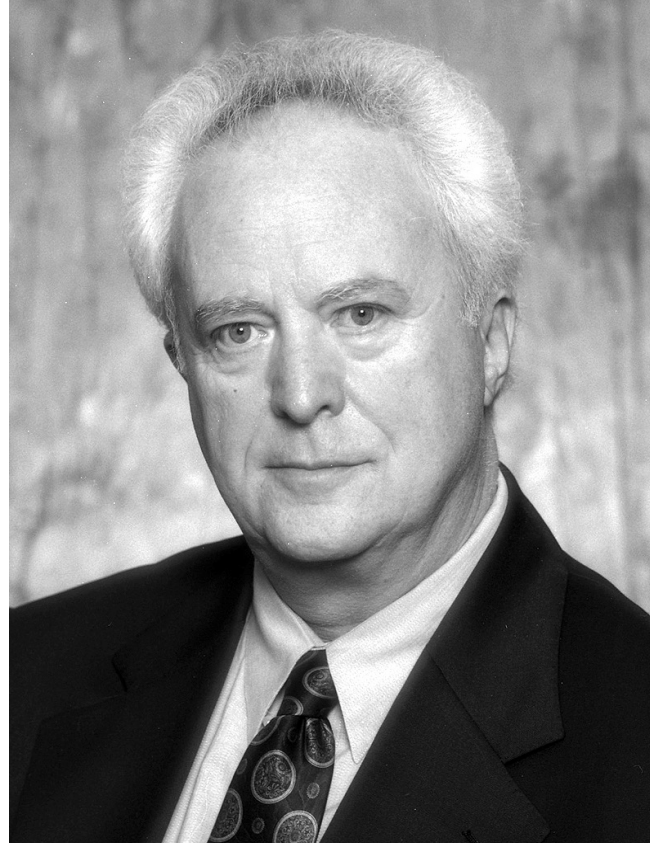


Gilles Morin

to get up and get in the car and drive 85 miles to meet him at a Tim Hortons so we could talk and give him a new direction. I know I'm not the only one who's responded. Other members of our initial group were prepared to respond to those needs as well because it does happen. So with that taking place we began to develop programs that did the same type of thing but that's the reason why we started. It was to provide a place for former members to relate.

CPR: Do you find it difficult to reach out to certain members? Some have voluntarily retired while others have been defeated. Some may have had positive experiences as parliamentarians while others may want to leave their experience in the position behind.

CE: We have a bear pit session – a Q&A and reception – with our youth parliament program and we try to get former MPs, MLAs, cabinet ministers or whoever to be part of pit. In Manitoba right now we don't find there is any really strong desire from the former members to come. There doesn't seem to be



Derwyn Shea

a real urgency from all three parties to get together again. They move on. They go back into private businesses or whatever and that takes up their time. So we do have a bit of a problem but we're working on it.

LA: I don't think the issue is whether they lost the election or not, it's more that they have to go back to work because the benefits are not that good if you're not 65. It's more an issue of needing to make a living. And because they're at work they can't necessarily come to our activities during the day. But, as far as being defeated or not, we have a mixture of all sorts of situations.

GM: There was a professor from McMaster University who wrote a wonderful article on how Members of Parliament react to defeat. You have to read that. When you're a member everyone knows you, when you're defeated, you're gone. You're a hero today and you're gone tomorrow – a nobody. Who will take care of you? And that's why I like the association –



David Warner

we can really help members who are having difficulty transitioning out of parliamentary life. And we don't hesitate and it doesn't cost you anything. But at least they have an ear. And it's so important that it's non-partisan. David was the speaker of the house; we became good friends, lifetime friends. Derwin is the same. There is a fraternity that exists, we don't call it a fraternity, but it's a unique group. It's a privilege to be in the house, it's a privilege to express yourself. So these are the things that we understand.

KH: It's camaraderie when we have our annual meeting or our Christmas soiree. They do want to come and see each other and talk and recognize the different people they sat in the house with. And I was also a deputy speaker so it's not a fraternity thank you very much! (Laughter) But the three of us, we did work together and kept that work in this particular association but this one started because there was a sad situation. The party seems to go to the wayside and you're left out there. When you've lost a job, it's not that you lost it to someone else you lose it by 30,000

votes or 20,000 votes. It's a lot different than one or two in a company and you do flounder for a while. The information and the job search put together by the legislature are okay, but it doesn't last long. And you're still on your own and you still don't have a job. And for a gentleman with a family that's very hard. In my party people went back to the line in the factory. You're an MPP one day and you're out on the line in the factory the next. So they do need us and we look after human resource issues and we look after a lot of those issues that are very important.

RDM: I would like to add that there's also, in my opinion, a democracy crisis right now. It's coming, anyway, if you look at the voting rate. A lot of people feel – and I'm one of them – when you say that I am a member of parliament or the national assembly, it's like (in a disdainful voice) “oh my God!” And that's very tough on some people. And I think that some of the work that we try to do in our jurisdiction is to bring a little attention, thought and added value to the fact that when you've run for office you've contributed to society specifically. And we want this to be communicated. We have a program we call it “Mémoires de députés” on a public channel on Sunday nights. It's funded by the national assembly. There's a retired journalist of the press gallery who interviews former members and that person talks about his or her life in the assembly. There are a lot of people who have been interviewed on a continuous basis and that brings a little bit more attention to the role that the members of the assembly play in society. And I think that there's a great need for that right now because there's a devaluation of the role of an elected official at all levels of government and that's not healthy for democracy. The other point I wanted to make was that it is true that when you leave political life, whether you're forced to leave or whether you leave by your own choice, the environment is totally different and as Karen said you are a nobody. If you've been there for more than two or three mandates, everybody forgot what you did before. Your family is the other members of the assembly and you feel a need to share with them. “So, what are you doing and how did you do this? How did you reintegrate your old life?” So there's a dynamic there and the non-partisanship is extremely important because it allows people to alleviate the tensions of regular partisanship. So you can joke about how you did and how you fought in the assembly. But outside, partisanship is one thing, but your real life is the relationship with your colleagues, it's a bit like a private college. You know, it's a network. It's your friends, they've lived through the same difficulties you have in different ways. It

gives the person who has left office a sense that he or she is not left in the middle of nowhere, with no relationship, with no friends. We all know that when you run for office you have no place for your friends. If you're in government it's even worse, to talk to a friend that's a judge you're in trouble. But it's all the same dynamic so there's isolation in the responsibility of being a member. You sort of let it go when you retire, whatever the reason, from that assembly. You still share with your colleagues great souvenirs and it's a pleasure to talk with them and share with them what they've achieved, and the sharing of experiences whether good or bad it's very good for the mind. Our assembly also has a speaker program for schools. We have members all over the province and have offered them as potential speakers if a current member of the assembly is unavailable. I feel that educating young people to the role of democracy is one of my jobs. I think I'm very committed to that, I think it's very important because I personally believe that democracy is in trouble.

CPR: You are non-partisan groups that represent (formerly) partisan members. Does this ever cause difficulties?

KH: We joke about it.

CE: There's a bit of a history to the partisan angle as well. When I go to gatherings with colleagues that were in the house when I was there in the 70s, the atmosphere is really no different because we joked around and enjoyed each other's company, then, when we were elected. When we were in committee and out of town, all of us would have dinner together in the evening to enjoy each other's company. When the house was sitting, you had night sittings; you'd go out and have dinner together. You could have really tough heated debates in the chamber and you'd walk out there'd be a bar down the North-wing and it'd be about 10:30 and we would go down there and watch the end of the hockey game...and that was all partisan. That joking and camaraderie was part of my life when I was elected. So that doesn't change when I meet former colleagues that I haven't seen for a long time. We just pick up where we left off. I think some of the members who are joining our organization as of this past election may have had a different experience than what I had. So there's a gap. And maybe for them it'll be a bit more of a challenge.

KH: And that was before, when we were elected, it was the first time they had so many women, women don't go to bars. Women do not say "Meet you down

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*~ Derwyn Shea
on the suicide of a former MPP
and the impetus for the Ontario
Association of Former
Parliamentarians*

at Joe's". Women had difficulty in being part of the good old boy network and going to watch the hockey game. And so when our government was elected and we elected so many women it changed a bit and it's harder for us to gather together as females because we simply didn't have that atmosphere, that we weren't used to that atmosphere of going out. But the non-partisanship was there in various ways. And David is right; in our committee here (with the former parliamentarians) partisanship is not a problem. We all served, we all served our constituents, and we are here to serve our members, our past members. And that is not a partisan question. We are here to serve all of them because no one else is. When you ask about our relationship with the legislative assembly each one is different but we continue to struggle. I know in the Canadian association (the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians) they're well supported by financial giving. We continue to struggle with that. Our membership pays for our organization for the most part. We do receive funding but I don't think they realize how much it takes to run an office and

all we have is one part-time person. So we all take on portfolios and work on those portfolios because it's the right thing to do, but we struggle.

DW: I just want to add on the subject of partisanship, I always got along with everybody when I was elected. Everywhere in our association you don't see people as Conservatives, Liberals, or NDP. After it's over, it's over. You're a former member and let's work on that. Don't worry about the fact that it's an NDP government, or a Conservative government or whatever; it's none of our business. Really, our business is to look after former members and our association. And make it better and stronger by being non-partisan.

CPR: Not all provinces have these organizations but you've found value in them in your jurisdictions. Are former members being utilized for the kind of knowledge that they have? If not, what else can be done to tap into that knowledge?

KH: I don't think the members are used to their full advantage and I don't think any of the legislatures of any of us realize that they could work through us and we would have that number of members. I think that there are certain individuals who certainly are chosen to lead a commission or to do research. But it would be easier for the legislature to work closer with us because we know the members we have and how they might work on behalf of the government in some research areas. We could handle things that do not fit within a legislative assembly but need to be done because we have the knowledge and we'd know what to do with something like that. No, I don't think any particular government is using us to the fullest capacity that we could be used.

DS: The US Congress has developed a very fine system of developing committees, tours, connections with foreign governments that particularly embrace the experience and participation of former members. Whether they were senators or members of the House of Representatives. And certainly, in Ontario, this is something we need to develop so that we can begin to provide value added for current members without them feeling like we are trying to be members. The bottom line to remember is that the key word is former. We need to show that we can provide studies and research, as we are beginning to do now in Ontario. And I think that will become self-evident over a period of time. It'll take a while to get there. When you try to start one of these organizations, current members are somewhat perplexed and bemused. They might say, "Well, who the hell do you think you are? Who are you trying to be? Get out of here; you had it, get lost!" And we understand that – it is a natural reaction. We do that even with seniors in our society: "Get out! You're old!" And I see that because I care for many seniors. The fact is, there's a tremendous amount of experience and wisdom in these former members that I value. And we don't need to rush in and to push ourselves on current governments, parliaments, or assemblies. Over a period of time if we do our job it will happen naturally. This is why, tripartite meetings are very important because it allows us to see what's happening with each other in Quebec City, in Winnipeg, and in Toronto. We can learn from each other.

KH: But without champions to do it, without a strong chair, without two or three strong people to take that on, it doesn't happen.