

New Parliamentarians Share Their Initial Thoughts About A Job Like No Other

At some point in their career, all parliamentarians are new parliamentarians. They come from diverse walks of life and assume their role with different levels of familiarity with parliament and expectations about their new roles. In this roundtable discussion, the Canadian Parliamentary Review spoke with seven recently elected MLAs from Alberta and Prince Edward Island to ask about their initial impressions of parliamentary life and how they were able to learn about the many facets of their work.

Peter Bevan-Baker, MLA, Jordan Brown, MLA, Greg Clark, MLA, Estefania Cortes-Vargas, MLA, Thomas Dang, MLA, Sidney MacEwen, MLA, Angela Pitt, MLA

CPR: How did you first become interested in running for office and what road led you to becoming a parliamentarian?

AP: I grew up in a very politically-charged family – actually opinionated is the better term – and the stage was always set to be very involved in government. I have always been involved in politics at some level, whether it was sign crews or stuffing envelopes, or being a board member. More recently I was a board member with the Wildrose Party for the past couple of years, and lastly the president of the local riding association. Winning a race to become an MLA is probably a political junkie's dream-come-true.

E-CV: I immigrated to Canada when I was about 7 years old and since then my parents have been active community members. Both of them brought me into community-building and policy from a young age and I loved it. I spent a lot of time setting up groups for at-risk youth in the Columbian community and advocating for student mental health. And that brought me towards wanting to do something to help society in a major way, so I decided to pursue social work. My first practicum was in (NDP MLA) Rachel Notley's office. It was there that I saw the integration of politics and policy and the integrity of the work that was being done for the community. Even outside of my practicum I was volunteering extra hours there, probably cutting into my sleep hours! So based on my childhood and what I was witnessing in her office, it was then that I knew that this is what I wanted to do – I just didn't expect to do it so soon. The likelihood of me winning this last election appeared fairly low and I thought it might take two or three runs before it happened, but there was a general mood for change.

Greg Clark is an Alberta Party MLA for Calgary-Elbow. Estefania Cortes-Vargas is a New Democratic Party MLA for Strathcona-Sherwood Park. Thomas Dang is a New Democratic Party MLA for Edmonton-South West. Angela Pitt is a Wildrose Party MLA for Airdrie. Peter Bevan-Baker is a Green Party MLA for Kellys Cross – Cumberland. Jordan Brown is a Liberal Party MLA for Charlottetown – Brighton. Sidney MacEwen is a Progressive Conservative Party MLA for Morell – Mermaid. All of these MLAs were elected for the first time in 2015.

GC: My journey into politics has really come full circle. I did a political science degree and graduated in 1993, which was the year of the Ralph Klein-Lawrence Decore election. I ended up working for Lawrence Decore as a part of the Official Opposition doing media and communications. I realized after three years that was no way to make a living,



Peter Bevan-Baker

so I went into the private sector in IT, went back to get my MBA, and then started an information management company within oil and gas. I did that for decade and very much enjoyed growing a start-up to a company that employed about 45 people and was living the Alberta entrepreneurial dream. But I kept getting pulled back into politics. I ran for the Alberta Party for first time in 2012 against Allison Redford, became leader in late 2013 because I saw some of the entrepreneurial spirit was missing from government and I wanted to bring it back. So here I am! I won the election in 2015 and have been an MLA for six months or so and it's been a really enjoyable experience.

SM: I had been involved with politics before having worked in the Opposition office, but was never really interested in making the transition to elected office. After much discussion with family, supporters convinced me to put my name forward. Having been heavily involved in the community anyway, it seemed natural to take on that type of a role full time.

JB: I've been involved in political organization for a number of years. That would extend back to my grandfather being an MLA before I was born. That sparked a real interest in me and I pursued elected politics as something I thought I would be well-suited to do and I way I could serve the people in my district while doing it.

PB-B: I got involved in politics over 25 years ago when I established a local organization of the federal Green Party in rural Ontario where I was living at the time. When nobody else came forward to run in the federal election in 1993, by default I became the Green Party candidate - the first of what would be 9 successive failed attempts (both provincial and federal) to be elected. Apparently, tenth time was a charm, and I was elected in May of this year as the MLA for Kellys Cross - Cumberland on PEI. I remained steadfast in my commitment to politics because of my children. I want to be able to look them in the eyes some time in the future, when the problems that are maturing today grow worse, and be able to tell them that I did my utmost to secure a prosperous, healthy and safe future for them.

CPR: There was a large turnover among parliamentarians in Alberta this year and the outgoing speaker held a rather novel, informal mock parliament. Did any of the Alberta MLAs here attend, and if so, did you find it useful?

GC: I did attend and it was incredibly useful! Seventy of 87 MLAs were new, and as far as I can recall every one of the new MLAs attended. To Speaker Zwozdesky's great credit, he made it as real as he possibly could. We had the sergeant-at-arms come in with a mock mace and call everyone to order. He then ran us through the orders of the day and took us through Question Period. He would take us through a portion of each procedure, stop and explain. He had the New Democrats positioned as government and asked the Wildrose Official Opposition to ask questions – and the questions they asked were real questions. They asked pretty pointed questions, so at one point when the Minister rose to respond and

was answering the question, the Wildrose started to heckle. And the Minister stopped and asked if the Wildrose member had anything he wanted to say or wanted to provide some input. The Speaker said, "No, no! Stop! If you do that in Question Period you're going to get creamed. It's not the way it works. You talk to me and you keep talking until you're finished or I stop you. You ignore however loud it gets in the legislature and you just keep on going." That was quite an interesting insight. But it was very interesting from a procedural standpoint to be seated and called to order and then do a mock Question Period. It was a unique experience to have that many new members and Speaker Zwozdesky did some great work to make sure we were all up to speed and even to allow us to jump ahead further than what it might have been otherwise.

AP: The mock parliament was only the second time we had ever been in the chamber, so it was still a very awe-inspiring experience in itself, but it was such a helpful experience. All but three of my caucus mates are brand new. Our House leader is a former staffer, so he's quite familiar with the rules, but the mock parliament was really quite interesting. We had some heckling going on and lots of questions. I think it also gave some hint as to the ideologies of various members of the House, so it gave us an idea of the lines of argument people would use in real debates.

E-CV: It was completely worthwhile. While you can watch Question Period, to be in it is another experience all together. I think what the mock parliament helped us do was see how we could be involved in the various aspects of parliamentary proceedings, but also showed us what types of procedural rules we needed to know. To go back to the part where there was heckling and the minister stopped to ask what the opposition member said – it's a shift from the normal culture. I don't think a lot of Albertans or Canadians spend much time interrupting each other on a routine basis. So it was also helpful to know what the culture of parliament is like. Even if it's not the kind of decorum we're trying to pursue, it does happen. People do heckle, and you need to know how to address it. Knowing that you have to speak to and through the Speaker was really important for everyone to realize. And because it was so well-attended, it helped us to get to know our colleagues in opposition and to set the tone. It gave us an opportunity to talk to one another about what we're going to build in the legislature. I remember during the mock parliament I was asked



Jordan Brown

to cause a point of order by insulting someone. I come from a social work background, so I don't normally insult people. So the opposition was helping me by giving me examples of how to insult them! I don't think media was there for most of this, so it was a very good and safe learning opportunity.

GC: There's quite a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes that's very cordial and professional. We're trying to get the business of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta done. We tend to do that in a reasonably collaborative manner; of course, not everyone agrees on everything all the time. But it is quite collaborative and from my perspective it's been quite a good experience so far.



Greg Clark

CPR: Alberta had a very large contingent of newly elected parliamentarians. Would something like their experiment with a mock parliament be useful elsewhere where turnover is not as high?

SM: We had our own version of a mock parliament within our own caucus, including a government and opposition and did a run through of the day including Question Period and all of the different functions. That was very helpful, but we were also lucky to have a number of experienced MLAs to help guide us through that.

JB: I do certainly think a mock parliament session would be helpful. Our rotary club puts on a youth parliament each year at the legislature and I've been involved with that over the years. When you think

about all the steps involved in bringing forward and debating legislation and other issues in a typical week, there's a logic to it and there's certainly a learning curve to it. Beyond that, in PEI we had about one month between the election and the return to the assembly. There was a very quick ramp up and we were thrown right into things. There have been a few comments about government or House leaders being an important resource and that was certainly true for us. It was important for my own education to have someone you could turn to as questions arose. I remember the first time a standing division was called for. I was sitting in my chair thinking to myself, 'what do I do now?' My government House leader came over and asked if I knew how to handle this and told me what I needed to do. There's a great confidence to be gained in being able to rely on those who have done all this before if you're able to do that from the cast of one election to the next.

CPR: That leads to another question. Some of you have been able to rely on members of your party caucuses who have had prior experience serving as parliamentarians. What type of advice did they offer? And for Mr. Clark and Mr. Bevan-Baker, as the sole members of your party in your respective legislatures, were there experienced colleagues in other parties who offered to help or were there other people you could turn to?

GC: We did have an Alberta Party MLA in an earlier parliament who was a floor-crosser, but I am the first elected Alberta Party MLA. I hired very experienced people for my legislative staff and they're very good at providing me with briefing binders, with an explanation of what the heck the committee of the whole is and what I'm expected to do. As I mentioned earlier, the House leaders from the other parties have been quite helpful in bringing me up to speed, but having had some experience working in the legislature previously and having sat on committees and boards of directors previously – although the structure is different – it's not wildly different from that experience. I've relied on a combination of experience from my professional life, my experience working in the legislature 25 years ago and my staff as well as just reading the standing orders. Each experience is unique – we still haven't gone through budget estimates – we're about to do that here. So it is a tremendous learning curve in terms of both the diversity and volume of work, but it is wonderful to experience and I really have enjoyed it very much.

PB-B: I was under particular scrutiny because I was the first ever Green MLA elected to the PEI assembly and there was a certain novelty to that. I certainly felt I was being watched very closely. The House had to make a decision about whether we would be granted official party status and whether I would have staffing. Until all that was done, which of course could not be discussed until the House sat, I was all by myself. But I have to say I had a great deal of support, kindness, and there was a real collegial atmosphere in the House from people like Jordie and Sid and everyone else. Though I was alone in a caucus, I did not feel unsupported. The legislature in PEI is an intimate place – there are only 27 of us and many of us know each other outside of politics. It's an unusual legislature in that respect. But I can't stress enough that there was a collaborative attitude that was brought to the house and that helped me tremendously.

CPR: And those of you who did have partisan colleagues to consult? What advice or support did they provide?

EC-V: The first piece of advice was to take things one step at a time. But I remember Brian Mason telling me that I should sleep with my standing orders in the sense that you should get to know them because these are your best friends. I remember in preparing for a session every morning he would go through important parts of the standing orders. His experience and knowledge of them is incredible. At the end of the first session we in the caucus were all really in awe of how his leadership really helped us to work together, to figure out what we didn't know, how to ask questions, how to know when we should be talking and when we shouldn't be saying anything at all. I remember I was also presenting a private member's bill in the first session, and all this was one month after the election – it was all happening very quickly. Having that caucus support for key messaging and tying that back into our own communities was important. Another piece of advice was to read through old transcripts of previous sessions. That was really helpful as well.

AP: One of the outstanding pieces of advice I received was 'say yes to everything and commit to nothing.' Being a new MLA is a learning process and you have to get every piece of information you can to help inform you and then somehow turn it off and sleep at night.



Estefania Cortes-Vargas

JB: One of the pieces of advice I heard from many people was to get to know the rules of procedure inside and out and to bring along a guide like Robert's Rules of Order so you have a comfort about the general rules in which you'll operate. It gives you a bit of backing if you're ever put on the spot. I come from the background of being a lawyer, so that's in my bailiwick anyway, but any parliamentarian would do well to know the rules of the game inside and out so that they can use them to their advantage.

SM: We've had some small oppositions in the past number of House sessions, but the main opposition party went from three to eight members this time. One of the nice advantages of that is we don't have to be up on our feet all the time. As Peter mentioned,



Thomas Dang

PEI has a small legislature and with only two or three opposition members you have to be on your feet all the time speaking to motions and handling the bulk of Question Period. It's nice now that you don't have to carry as much of that load and you have more time to watch and learn with a bigger team.

TD: Having a good working relationship with experienced members is very important. They're a sounding board if you're unsure or want to get an opinion about something you're considering. It's very useful and productive. And, of course, we have friends among our federal colleagues as well who offer advice. One of the things I was told which has been valuable is to always find time for yourself at the end of the day. You all want to do good work

and everyone wants to change the world, but you can't do that if you burn out after six months.

CPR: How quickly were you able to get your constituency offices and/or legislative offices off the ground? Some of you mentioned you hired experienced staff, but were there training sessions for new staff or assistance to help them establish themselves quickly?

TD: My office was lucky; we were hired up in June, right before our first mini Spring session. In terms of training opportunities, the Legislative Assembly of Alberta did provide a couple days of constituency training for our staff. The funny thing was, since we haven't had such a large transition in the legislature in so many years in Alberta, they only schedule two of those sessions per year. If you miss the first one you'd have to wait about eight months to get into the next one. I hired early enough to get into the first training session, but some of my colleagues who didn't might have staff who missed those. But there are other opportunities with our caucus to offer support, and certainly the Legislative Assembly is willing to work with our staff to make sure we get the job we need done.

GC: Staff hiring was a priority for me. We were hired up within about two weeks following the election. It was important to get to work on constituency files. I did hire rookie staff for my constituency office, because they had been on the ground and knew the issues in the constituency, but I hired experienced staff in the legislative office. And the assembly staff has been a great help to both my staffs.

PB-B: My situation is rather unique, but as I said earlier I could not begin to think about starting to hire staff until we knew if we would have funding. Thankfully, my campaign manager for the election was available. He has a degree in political science and is a wonderful man and there was no real training required for him.

EC-V: In Alberta we had so many new MLAs and at the same time the legislative offices were moving buildings – so it was interesting to see them all packing boxes at the same time as trying to get us ready for the session, processing leases and getting phones connected. I was able to train my staff because I did have constituency experience myself, so that was one of the simpler tasks for me. I had templates that we had used and procedures

for answering different questions. I remember even before I had hired staff my office was being used for setting up meetings. It was quite a whirlwind as the first sessions was also taking place.

CPR: Most, if not all, of you have had the opportunity to speak in the legislature. Can you describe what you were feeling the first time you spoke in that setting? Have you found that you're developing a particular niche or specialty in the legislature?

AP: I was the first member of my caucus to speak in the House and it was during the process to nominate a new Speaker in the House. That was quite interesting and a very overwhelming experience. But it was my maiden speech that was particular special for me because you get a chance to speak about your community and where you are coming from. That meant so much to me and it was a humbling experience. I might be a little bit addicted to standing up and speaking in the house now!

TD: I had the opportunity to speak in a couple of committees and in the committee of the whole. The first thing that came to mind was, 'Wow, there are 86 other people here looking at me and television cameras pointed at me, and every word I say will be recorded in Hansard forever.' So there were definitely some butterflies in my stomach even though I had done some public speaking in the past. It's humbling, because you realize, 'I'm not speaking as Thomas Dang, I'm speaking as the Member for Edmonton – South West.' You have the opportunity to speak for your constituents and to bring about change for your constituents. That experience didn't go away as I spoke a few more times, and I am going to hold onto it. That's what we were elected to do and it's work that has a meaningful impact back home.

SM: I was quite nervous the first time I stood to speak, but it all went well. One of the advantages of our legislature is that it's small with 27 members and you have the opportunity to speak on a numbers of matters each day if you so choose. You get used to speaking on the floor of the House very quickly.

JB: I had an interesting first time on my feet in the house. I had quite a bit of public-speaking experience in the courtroom setting during the first five years of my legal practice, but my first duty in the legislature was to move the Speech from the Throne. The honourable leader of the Opposition is



Sidney MacEwen

a gregarious fellow and when we came in knowing that would be on the agenda for the evening he gave me a bit of a heads up that he was going to be coming for me. He proceeded to chide me for the first 10 to 20 minutes of my speech. I felt pretty comfortable that once I made it through that part I could handle pretty much anything else on my feet.

PB-B: Just to finish off the PEI trio, I was thrilled and nervous and felt a great weight on my shoulders because it was not just me speaking for the first time, but also the first time an MLA from my party spoke to the legislature. But, in part of my other life I have been a musician and an actor so the idea of being able to deliver a line was not foreign to me. I felt very focused. One of the great privileges of being in



Angela Pitt

the PEI legislature, as Sidney said, is that you have the opportunity to speak frequently. As leader of a party here I get the opportunity to ask a series of questions every day and a chance to respond to all ministers' statements. Very quickly you begin to feel like an experienced parliamentarian. And, again, the intimacy and support throughout the legislature is quite evident here.

EC-V: I remember the first time I stood up to speak was to present a private member's bill. I was really nervous, but it was also a very proud moment because I like to think of myself as a very action-based person and it was great to think that my first words would be about a bill I was presenting. It was really humbling.

CPR: Both of your legislatures have majority governments, so aside from by-elections, it will be a number of years before a fresh crop of new parliamentarians are elected. Thinking ahead, what type of advice would you offer to them based on your experience so far? And are there additional steps legislatures could take to help you transition into this new role more easily?

EC-V: I think it would be the same advice given to me – read the standing orders and get to know the rules of the game and everyday procedures. You'll know what to do and how to react when something new happens, you'll know what a division is and what to do at that point. Even reading transcripts and having attended Question Period before – that is very helpful.

TD: I mentioned earlier that everyone running for office wants to do all of this great work and bring about change, but as a new parliamentarian – and I know this and struggle with this myself – find time for yourself. Find time, even if it's one night a week, where you take time to go for a walk in the river valley, or watch something on Netflix. Find some time to relax because you're going to be sitting for a lot of nights in that legislature, you're going to be doing a lot of work when you're not in the legislature, and you need to be rested enough so that you're at the top of your game to do the best job for your constituents.

PB-B: I'd like to echo what Thomas just said. Taking time for yourself is just critical. Surrounding yourself with good people is also enormously important, especially for someone like me who was starting from scratch. And trusting your instincts is very important, because you're always second-guessing yourself – especially if you're in a caucus of one. You don't have anyone to bounce ideas off. Developing the ability to trust myself and my instincts was an important lesson for me.

JB: If you can, it's great if you can find someone with experience that you can trust to bounce ideas off of. I was fortunate to have Rob Young, an experienced MLA, who was working in our office during the first legislative sitting. It's wonderful to have someone like this to answer questions you may otherwise be afraid to ask. It helps build confidence when you have the ability to confer with someone who has done it before.

CPR: No one really knows what the job of an MP really entails until they step into the role. With that in mind, is there any question I should have posed or any aspect of your new role we didn't discuss that you'd like to touch upon?

GC: I think all of us are in this for the right reasons – we're working for and serving our constituents. You get yelled at a fair bit. And especially with social media, it's become quite easy to hide behind a screen while you berate someone and say some reasonably impolite things. Maintaining perspective is challenging. As a solo MLA, I think it's perhaps even more challenging, because you don't have a caucus to go back to commiserate with. I think the hardest thing is – and I hope Angela, Estefania and Thomas won't use this against me – when you make a mistake. You listen to the criticism you're receiving and you say to yourself, 'They've got a good point, I did mess that up a bit.' It's different if someone's a wide-eyed yahoo with whom you just simply disagree politically, but if you mess up publically and people are yelling at you on Twitter – that's tough. But, if you surround yourself with good people and do your best to maintain a strong connection to family and friends, hopefully you succeed. But, I've only been at this for six months, so it's still very much a learning process. You have

to be committed to the job. It's more than a full-time job and you have to see it as doing a public service. That's how I reconcile all of this – I'm doing this work to make my community a better place.

JB: Speaking to Greg's point and Thomas's point before that, one of the key things relating to my decision-making process to run and right through my experience today was to have an early conversation with my wife. We have two very young children – one is two and a half and the other is eight months. Our youngest was born a month before my nomination took place. And I could not have done this without a partner who supported me every step along the way. There's more to that than just helping out around the house and taking care of kids – you're whole family has to be on board for the life you are undertaking. They have to be prepared for criticisms, they have to be prepared for the highs and lows, and they have to be prepared for the fact that your life is no longer just your own going forward. They have to be on board every step of the way – mentally, physically, everything. If I didn't have that support, I don't think I would have been able to do this job nearly as effectively.

CPR: Thank you all so much for your time.