

Organizing the Halls of Power: Federal Parliamentary Staffers and Members of Parliament's Offices

This article attempts to define the work of federal parliamentarians' staffers so that their position, responsibilities, and ultimately their role can be better understood by parliamentary observers and the public at large. The author first discusses the role of an MP's staff member in order to build a job description of common tasks and responsibilities. Then he explores and defines some possible organizational structures of Members of Parliament's offices based on his own observations.

Daniel Dickin

Much has been written about the roles of Members of Parliament and the operations of Canada's Parliament in order to better understand how Canada is governed. *Tragedy in the Commons*, for example, endeavored to conduct "exit interviews" with Members of Parliament to discuss how they experienced elections, governing, party politics, dealing with constituents' issues, and ultimately defeat or retirement from public life. But while the role of Members of Parliament may be becoming more well known, the same cannot be said for their right-hand men and women: Canada's political staffers.

Surprisingly little is publicly known or discussed about staffers. The varied nature of their work in support of Members of Parliament – who are much more accessible to the media and the public – provides a wide degree of latitude in defining what a staffer does. At best, this means a staffer's job is shrouded in a degree of mystery. At worst, it can lead to a full-on slandering of a group of committed public servants. Recent years have seen the pejorative moniker "the boys in short pants"¹ used to describe some staffers while others have been labeled "ruthless, cutthroat psychopaths."² Such negative statements come from a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the role of staffers.

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This essay attempts to define what staffers do so that their position, responsibilities, and ultimate role can be better understood by parliamentary observers and the public at large. First, I will discuss the role of an MP's staff member in order to build a job description of common tasks and responsibilities. Second, I will explore and define some possible organizational structures of Members of Parliament's offices. This essay should be understood as one person's observations of how staffers and offices operate. It cannot be applied as a one-size-fits-all doctrine, since each Member of Parliament is given wide latitude to organize an office as he or she sees fit. There also may be common trends and differences between offices of the same political party and between different political parties or between federal and provincial staffers. While those trends and differences are not the subject of this essay, I welcome submissions from other staffers on these same topics to expand our collective knowledge. This essay will contribute to the public's understanding of who staffers are, what they do, and how their office structures them to operate within Canada's Parliamentary government.

Part One: The Role of MP's staff

Generally speaking, there are three types of staffers: staffers in an MP's constituency office, ministerial staffers, and staffers in an MP's Ottawa office. Much has already been written about the work done by constituency staffers thanks to Peter MacLeod's two-year research study on the topic.³ Likewise, Ian Brodie has written of the job descriptions and necessities of ministerial staffers, clarifying their role in navigating the bureaucracy and advising and serving their minister.⁴ The roles of these two types of staffers



Behind every Member of Parliament there is a hard working staff based at Parliament Hill and within a constituency office.

are relatively well known, but the same cannot be said for an MP's Ottawa staffers. While I do touch on constituency staffers' work and how they are positioned in a hierarchy in part two, the focus of this paper is Members of Parliament's Ottawa office staffers (referred to here as "Parliamentary staffers" or "Ottawa staffers"). Together these three essays can be used to begin to paint a broader picture of staffers.

Parliamentary staffers are some of Canada's most important, influential, committed, and hardest-working public servants. Jenni Byrne, a senior adviser and organizer to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, was known as "the other woman behind Harper"⁵ (the first of course being his wife Lauren), and Gerry Butts, a senior adviser and long-time friend to Prime Minister

Justin Trudeau, has been called "Prime Minister Butts" for the strong gatekeeping influence he exerts over Trudeau and his office.⁶ But despite their significant influence and incredible workload, there are hundreds of other staffers whose roles are not well known or discussed. This section focuses on the hiring, training, and working conditions of staffers.

The Need For a Staffer

Members of Parliament did not always have staff. As Peter MacLeod notes, before cheap air travel, the Parliamentary calendar revolved around the agricultural cycle: in the fall MPs would take the train from their constituencies to Ottawa, stay in Ottawa for the winter, and spend the majority of the

spring, summer, and part of the fall back in their constituencies.⁷ MPs would speak directly with their constituents, personally respond to letters and phone calls, and coordinate their own schedules. Prior to 1968, a secretarial pool would dispatch a secretary to assist an MP for a few days at a time, however they were laid off during periods of recess and dissolution.⁸ In 1958, secretaries were dedicated to individual MPs, and a decade later the MP was authorized to hire one full-time secretary. In 1974, a second full-time secretary was authorized and some constituency offices were created. By the 1999-2000 fiscal year, an MP was given a budget of \$190,000 for the purpose of staffing his or her office. Today an MP may have about six to eight staffers between their Ottawa and constituency offices.

The introduction and proliferation of political staffers mirrors the increasing size and responsibility of the federal government and the explosion of mass and electronic media. The election of Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in 1968 marked a significant milestone for large, activist, interventionist governments; the growth of these governments strongly correlates with the increase in MPs' office budgets and number of staff to handle the increased workload. Today's MPs simply could not perform their jobs without the work of their staffers.

MPs are assigned national roles, such as a critic position, a ministerial portfolio, or a committee assignment. They also serve the residents of their constituencies by inquiring about citizenship applications, helping to access government funding for businesses or citizens, or requesting that a department take a second look at a government decision. There are also the multitude of media platforms and the 24/7 news cycle; MPs are expected to be present and available to their local media, as well as the national media if their portfolio or interests relate to current affairs. They are also generally expected to be on all Internet platforms, including having a personal website, and Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube accounts. The federal government is too large, and its topics too broad and complex, for everything to be managed by one person. Today's parliamentary offices require a team of people to perform the work of an effective MP.

Hiring

Parliamentary staffers may become involved and hired into a political office through numerous avenues. They are almost always members of the political party for which they work. Considering the highly sensitive nature of the work they perform, it would be difficult to trust someone who is not on the same team. The House

of Commons recognizes a staffer's position as one that "requires [the] utmost trust, particularly because of the politically sensitive and partisan environment in which their duties are carried out."⁹ There are a few exceptions to this, for example some employees who continue working for an MP because of his or her district, regardless of the MP's party.

Initial exposure to a political office may come through an internship organized by the party or through a Parliamentary program, through volunteering with an electoral district association (EDA), or through knowing someone already working for a Member of Parliament. Many staffers volunteer on Parliament Hill before being hired into a paid position.

MPs are given wide discretion to manage their offices as they see fit. As the House of Commons *Procedure and Practice* notes:

Each Member is the employer of all his or her employees and each Member has the prerogative to recruit, hire, promote and release employees. A Member is allowed full discretion in the direction and control of the work performed on his or her behalf by employees and is subject only to the authority of the Board of Internal Economy and the House of Commons in the exercise of that discretion. Members determine the duties to be performed, hours of work, job classifications and salaries, and are responsible for employee relations. Subject to specific terms and conditions, Members may enter into contracts for services with individuals, agencies or organizations and use a portion of the Member's Office Budget for the payment of these contractors.¹⁰

This gives individual Members of Parliament incredibly wide latitude to manage their offices as they see fit.

Parliamentary staffers are also in a unique position as public servants. They are assigned public service employee ID numbers and they pay into the public servants' pension plan. They are employees of the Government of Canada, yet they are also exempt from certain benefits and policies that apply to other public servants. For example, there is no job security beyond what the individual Member of Parliament offers (and for as long as they remain in office), and Parliamentary staff are allowed (and required) to execute their jobs through a partisan lens with a view to benefiting their MP and his or her party.

There are many parallels that can be drawn between the officer-noncommissioned member (NCM) relationship of the military and the Member of Parliament-staffer relationship. In the military, officers *set* broad policy objectives and define the ideal end-state. It is largely the NCMs who *implement* the procedures and policies that will achieve their commanders' objectives. Parliament is strikingly similar: MPs will define a broad stance on an issue or a policy they wish to advance ("We need to lower taxes for families," "we need to get more people into the skilled trades"). Staffers are the ones who research the issue, liaise with stakeholders, gain supporters, and package everything together to make the strongest possible case for that policy stance. As well, if in government, it is largely staffers (working with public servants) who will write and implement the policies so that their MP's or minister's end-state is achieved. Staffers are Parliament's soldiers: the doers, the foot soldiers who do the ground work to achieve their MP's objectives.

Training

Once a staffer has been hired, they need to be trained. Staffers may have already been trained through their prior volunteer experience, however, since each individual MP hires his or her own staff, their job position and responsibility can vary greatly.

Training is particularly difficult in this environment for three reasons. First, the exceptionally quick news cycle and demand for quick responses to issues leave little time to take stock and "learn" the right way to deal with an issue. Embarrassing mistakes and political problems are often solved by cutting the responsible staffer loose. Andrew MacDougall, the former Director of Communications to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, referred to this as "the dark cloud of knowing that your next mistake could end up being your last."¹¹ Second, there is large turnover of staffers leaving for other MP's offices, a job in the public service, a job in the private sector, or returning to school. Because of this, there is usually little time (perhaps a few days) to learn the job and get up to speed on its requirements. Finally, a large part of being a staffer is reading, analyzing, and synthesizing large amounts of information. There is no training to learn how to read multiple news reports or provide your MP with a summary of the latest Auditor General's report, although there are tools available to help fulfill these responsibilities. There is no training manual one can read to learn how to be a staffer.

For those topics for which training can be provided, there are two types of training. One is training provided by Parliament's non-partisan public servants, for

common purposes necessary for the operations of Parliament and MPs' offices at large. For example, parliamentary employees may provide training for how to use the internal pay system, or how to access the Library of Parliament for research requests or technical support. The second type of training is provided through the staffer's political party or parliamentary caucus. This training is understandably more partisan and more results-focused. For example, a senior critic, Member of Parliament, or senior staffer may organize a conference or training session on creating better editorial pieces, writing better speeches, or how to use Facebook or Twitter for constituent engagement more effectively.

Working Conditions

Staffers are known for working grueling hours. While they technically sign contracts indicating a 37.5-hour work week (eight hours, five days a week, with 30 minutes for lunch), it would be exceptionally difficult to fulfill the job's requirements in so few hours. When the House of Commons is sitting it is not uncommon to work from 8:00am until 8:00pm, and those hours are easily extended earlier and later. However, a "normal" day (as far as any day can be considered normal) is probably from 8:00 or 8:30am until 6:00pm or 6:30pm. During non-sitting weeks ("break weeks" or constituency weeks, when the MP is in their riding) it is much more common to work a standard eight-hour day. To compensate for these periods of intensity, the House of Commons allows MPs to grant "compensatory leave" or a performance award.¹²

The long hours are largely a necessity of running the government. Issues and crises happen at all hours of the day and night, and the 24/7 news cycle requires that MPs be available to respond to questions or comments very quickly. Take the following as an illustrative but simplified example: the event that drives the day's agenda (and therefore a staffer's work schedule) is Question Period, where the Opposition gets 45 minutes each sitting day (from 2:15 pm to 3:00 pm) to hold the government to account. The Opposition attempts to ask questions and solicit responses that will make the evening news cycle showing the government in a negative light, while the government attempts to keep that from happening. Preparations for Question Period by MPs and ministers usually happen from 1:00pm to 2:00pm. That means the ministers need answers and solutions by 12:30pm, and the Opposition MPs asking the questions need to finalize their lines of questioning. That means staffers have likely given an initial briefing to their MP by 8:30am or 9:00am and spent most of the morning researching, analyzing, and consulting with stakeholders and public servants on the issue. If the event

broke on the previous evening's news, it was surely also the topic of the daily 7:00am issues management conference call, attended by the staffers of senior critics or government ministers. Finally, if the issue was particularly close to or specifically affected an MP or his or her portfolio, a staffer was almost certainly in the office even earlier, preparing for that 7:00am conference call. Using this example, it becomes easy to appreciate how quickly a staffer's 12-hour day can be extended. Andrew MacDougall, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's former Director of Communications, is the only staffer I am aware of who has publicly confirmed this grueling schedule. An average day in his life usually started at 5:30am and ended at 11:00pm, normally six days a week, for weeks on end without a break.¹³

Many staffers become very close with their Members of Parliament and other staffers in the same office, largely because of the long hours they put in together, their shared hardships, and the drive towards a common goal. Staffers travel regularly with their MPs and spend hours together briefing the MP on a topic or issue before an event or meeting. When budgets are tight it is not uncommon for staffers to stay in their MP's personal residences rather than a hotel. When an MP retires, staffers are sometimes known to pursue the MP's office and emulate or change the way the MP did business. Staffers become close with the MP's family and often come to be considered members of the extended family. Perhaps the most well-known recent example is Ray Novak, who rose through the ranks to become Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Chief of Staff. He stayed in an apartment above Harper's garage while he was the Leader of the Official Opposition.¹⁴ This not only demonstrates the close working environment between MP and staffer, but also that the grueling work hours made this arrangement beneficial for Novak and Harper. To put in such intense hours of work requires a commitment to the cause of governing and a personal respect for the MP.

Part Two: Organizational Structure

The first part of this essay examined the role of a staffer and his or her working conditions. I will now discuss the organizational structure of an MP's office and how staff duties and responsibilities are divided. At the top of the hierarchy is the MP.

However, he or she reports to people in the party leader's office, senior critic or ministerial offices, and of course, voters. Since this essay discusses the organizational structure of an MP's office, the MP is shown as the highest-ranking person.

Budget

An MP's budget is publicly available and updated quarterly through the Speaker of the House of Commons.¹⁵ Staffers are paid from the Member's Office Budget (MOB), which is a category of funding from the MP's total budget "to pay for employee salaries, service contracts, hospitality and advertising expenses, other printing services, constituency office leases, office operating costs, transportation expenses (when no travel points are used), as well as other travel-related expenses." The MOB varies depending on the population of an MP's constituency and its geographic location.¹⁶ For 2015, the riding of Nepean was given the base MOB of \$288,450 plus \$17,400 as an "elector's supplement" because of the riding's population, while the riding of Miramichi-Grand Lake was given the base \$288,450 plus \$19,230 as a "geographic supplement."¹⁷

Because the MOB is not only used to pay staff salaries, it is not possible to determine precisely how much a staffer is paid simply by looking at the total budget figures. This is important to note because costs of living vary greatly across Canada. For example, constituency office leases are significantly more expensive in large metropolitan areas like Toronto or Vancouver, leaving less money available in the budget to hire staff. Similarly, the cost of living may be lower in a rural riding, meaning cheaper leases and more money to be allocated to staff salaries. Irrespective of these factors, Parliament capped the 2015 annual maximum salary of a staffer at \$82,800.¹⁸

It bears repeating that the following job descriptions are guidelines only. Each MP has the authority to organize her office as she sees fit, meaning there will be differences from one MP to another. In my experience these descriptions are accurate, however the salaries and job descriptions are presented with this context in mind.

Positions and Job Descriptions

Chief of Staff – full-time – salary range: \$65,000-\$82,800: the Chief of Staff is the senior staffer, reporting directly to the MP. Working closely with the MP to achieve his or her objectives, the Chief of Staff manages both the Ottawa- and constituency-based staffers. The Chief of Staff is also most commonly the person responsible for filing the MP's travel expenses and reimbursements. Often also assigned the role of Legislative Assistant, this staffer is responsible for tracking legislation through the House of Commons, and may assist in the drafting of Private Members' Bills. Chiefs of Staff are commonly lawyers or have some legal training and education.

Parliamentary Assistant – full-time – salary range: \$35,000-\$65,000: the Parliamentary Assistant is the second person in the Ottawa office. This person primarily manages the office, which includes ordering office supplies, greeting guests as they arrive, coordinating the MP’s schedule, answering phones, and responding to email and letter mail inquiries. The Parliamentary Assistant is commonly also the Communications Assistant, with the additional responsibilities of writing press releases and editorials, managing the MP’s website and social media, and coordinating local and national media requests. Finally, this is commonly the person who “staffs the MP” while in Ottawa. As versatile personal assistants they: attend meetings and events with the MP; carry money to pay for tickets, food, or drinks; take photos when appropriate; collect business cards and take notes of follow up meetings or inquiries; and have a contingency plan with the MP ahead of time if an event goes sideways – whatever tedious administration is required to keep the MP focused on shaking hands and talking to people. (There is also commonly a constituency staffer who staffs the MP at constituency events.)

Scheduling Assistant – part-time – salary range: \$10,000-\$25,000: the Ottawa office may hire a part-time person to help manage the MP’s schedule. This person is responsible for updating the MP’s calendar with events taking place in Ottawa, such as Parliamentary votes, House duty, receptions, and meetings. The Scheduling Assistant on Parliament Hill works closely with the constituency’s Scheduling Assistant to minimize conflict and ensure the schedule is as clear as possible.

Correspondence Assistant – part-time – salary range: \$10,000-\$25,000: While the Communications Assistant is primarily responsible for communications, the office may hire a part-time staffer to assist with correspondence. MPs receive enormous amounts of mail every day, commonly from constituents asking an MP to support or oppose a government bill or decision. The Correspondence Assistant gathers facts and information, liaises with the necessary critics or government ministers, and drafts the letter for the MP to sign.

Constituency Manager – full-time – salary range: \$30,000-\$60,000: the Constituency Manager is the MP’s senior staffer in the constituency. He or she manages the staffers in the constituency and manages constituents’ issues (known as “casework”). As noted earlier, this may include asking a government department to review one of its decisions, asking for an update on a

citizenship application, helping a business fill out an application for government funding, or directing the constituent to the right place to answer a question they have.

Constituency Assistant – full-time – salary range: \$25,000-\$45,000: the full-time Constituency Assistant is usually responsible for managing casework, as described above, and may also be the person who staffs the MP at constituency events.

Constituency Assistant – part-time – salary range: \$10,000-\$20,000: the part-time Constituency Assistant assists one of the full-time constituency staffers, usually with casework or data entry. This person may also have the responsibility of sending “greetings” from the MP: a certificate celebrating a significant milestone like a birthday or marriage or a short note congratulating a community organization on a significant event.

Scheduling Assistant (Constituency) – part-time – salary range: \$10,000-\$20,000: like the Scheduling Assistant in Ottawa, this person is responsible for managing the MP’s schedule in the constituency. MPs are commonly invited to speak to local Chambers of Commerce, schools, and local community stakeholders, and this staffer organizes the MP’s schedule in the riding. This person may also organize drop-in events at the constituency office, where the public is invited to stop by, visit, and have a coffee with their MP.

The above-noted salaries present a range of a total staff budget between \$195,000 and \$342,800. Where staff are placed within this range is a decision left to the MP and is dependent on the MP’s riding, total budget, and the staff member’s experience.

Considering the positions outlined above, the figures on the next two pages show a few of the potential organization structures for Members of Parliament’s offices. This too is highly dependent upon the MP’s personal preference and the competence of the staff members working for him or her.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the duties of a Parliamentary staffer and the organization and structure of Members of Parliament’s Parliamentary offices. First, I examined the role of a Member of Parliament’s staff, from the growth of the need for Parliamentary staffers from secretarial pools in the first half of the 20th century to full-fledged political advisers of the 21st century. The hiring, training, and working conditions of staffers demonstrate a unique position within the federal

Figure 1: Typical Staff Organization

This organization follows the structure and positions noted above.

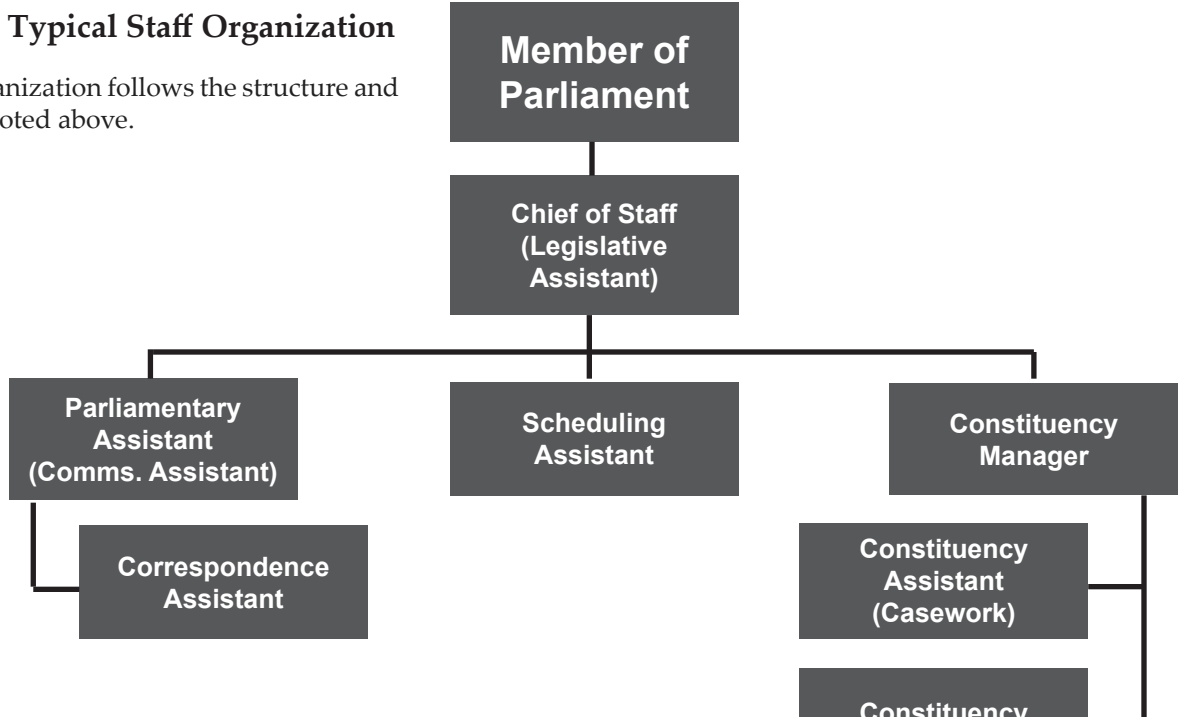
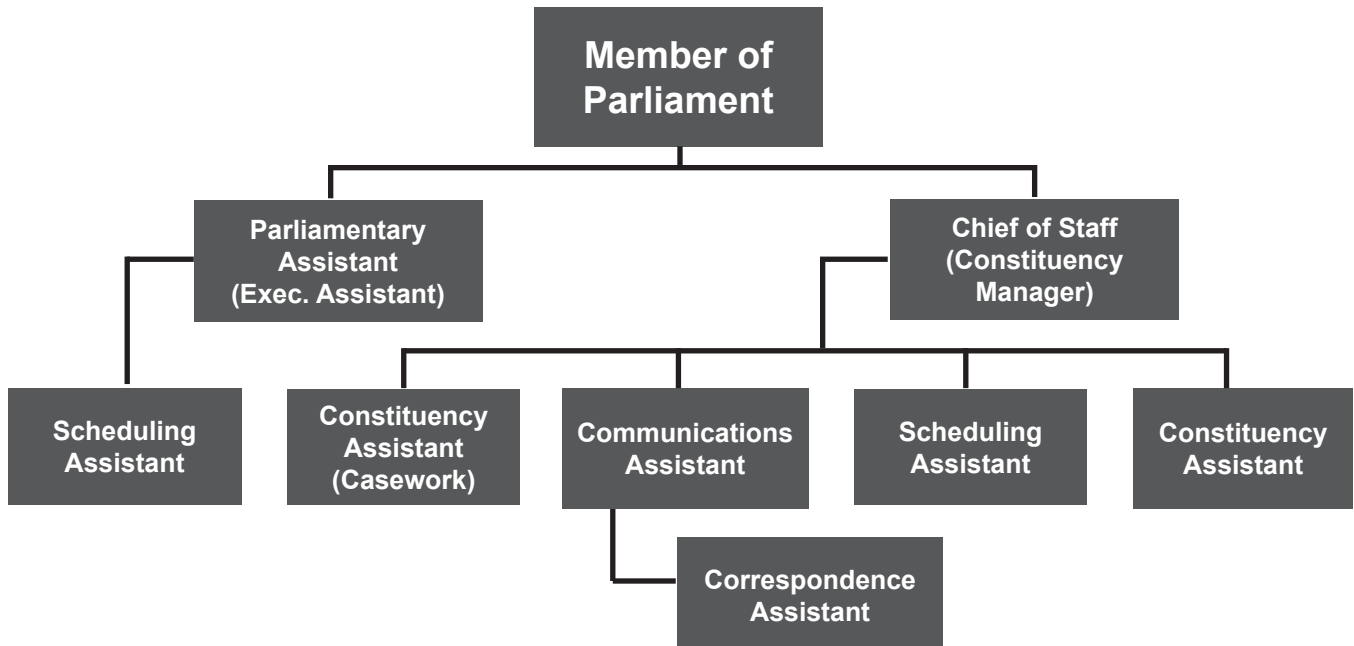


Figure 2: Constituency-Focused Organization

In this organization, the majority of the MP’s work is done through his or her constituency office. This includes the Chief of Staff being located in the constituency and also coordinating the casework, communications, and correspondence from the constituency. Because of this, staffers in Ottawa become more of an Executive Assistant: coordinating the MP’s schedule while in Ottawa, attending meetings with the MP, and answering phone calls and emails.



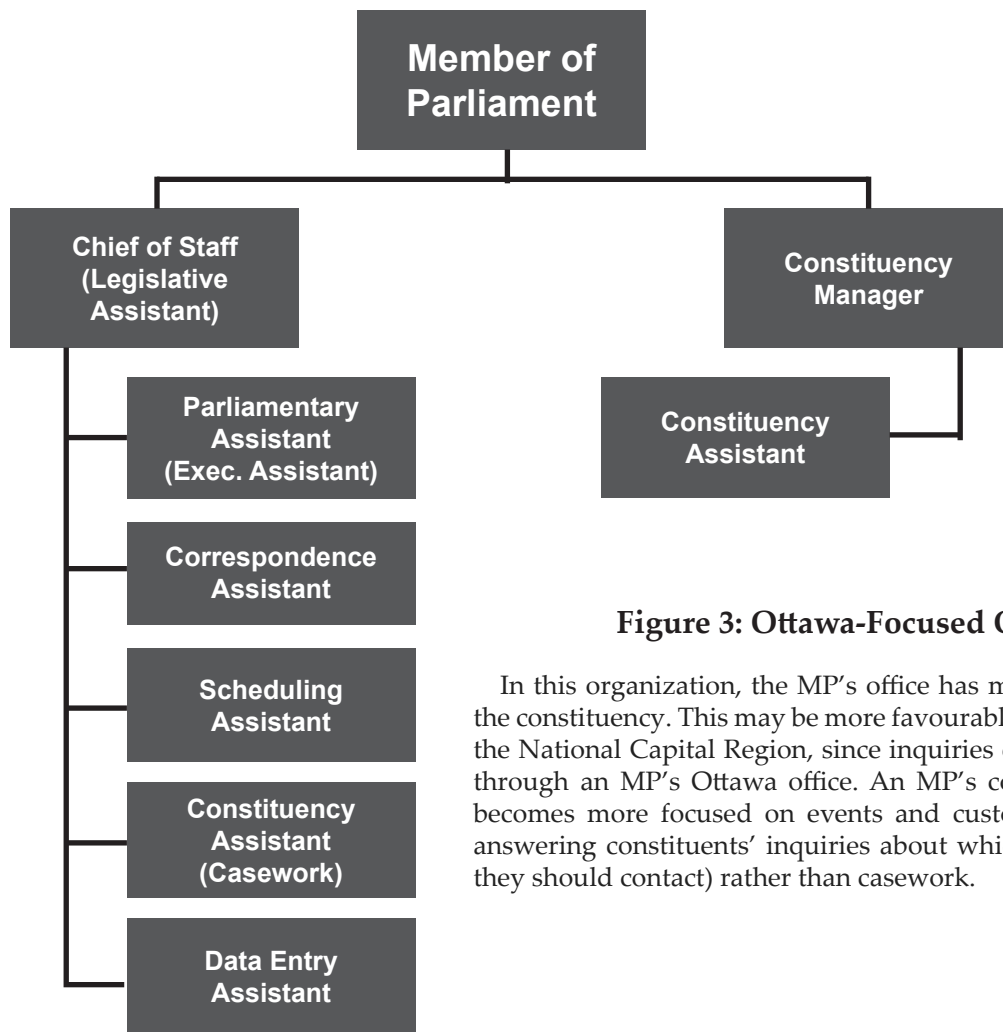


Figure 3: Ottawa-Focused Organization

In this organization, the MP’s office has more staff in Ottawa than in the constituency. This may be more favourable when the MP’s riding is in the National Capital Region, since inquiries could be easily coordinated through an MP’s Ottawa office. An MP’s constituency office therefore becomes more focused on events and customer service (for example, answering constituents’ inquiries about which government department they should contact) rather than casework.

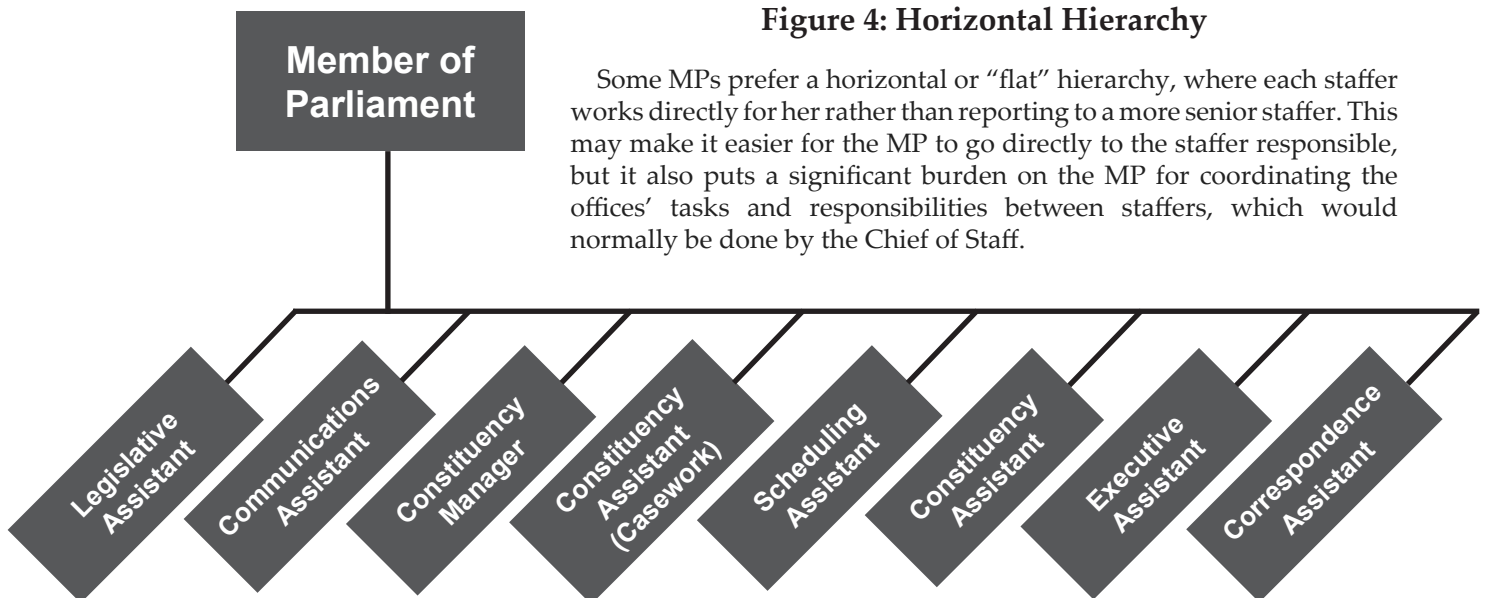


Figure 4: Horizontal Hierarchy

Some MPs prefer a horizontal or “flat” hierarchy, where each staffer works directly for her rather than reporting to a more senior staffer. This may make it easier for the MP to go directly to the staffer responsible, but it also puts a significant burden on the MP for coordinating the offices’ tasks and responsibilities between staffers, which would normally be done by the Chief of Staff.

public service that is not well known or understood. Second, I explored the organizational structures of Members of Parliament's offices. With an annual budget in 2015 of \$288,450 (plus a potential geographic or elector supplement), this section proposed ways that MP's offices may be organized with approximately six to eight staffers. They hold titles such as Chief of Staff, Parliamentary Assistant, Correspondence Assistant, Ottawa and constituency Scheduling Assistants, Constituency Manager, Constituency (Casework) Assistant, and additional Ottawa- or constituency-based staffers. Together, staffers in MP's offices form a cohesive team that provides exceptional, well-rounded service and advice to their Members of Parliament.

As I noted earlier, MPs have exceptional latitude to organize their offices in the ways that they see fit. If the information contained in this essay differs between offices – especially between different political parties or provincial legislatures – then I would encourage my fellow staffers to publish their experiences. Providing first-hand accounts will establish a public dialogue to see the similarities and differences between provincial and federal legislatures and between different political parties. The growth of this dialogue should produce a better understanding of staffers' roles in Parliamentary offices, and therefore yield a greater respect for some of Canada's hardest-working public servants.

Notes

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