

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE OFFICE OF DEPUTY SPEAKER

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The Deputy Speakership is one of those parliamentary offices about which little has been written. Although some duties are prescribed by statute, the great bulk of what a Deputy Speaker does is delegated to him by the Speaker on an informal basis. His role may include certain administrative or ceremonial functions as well as the many hours spent presiding over the House. In this article the present Deputy Speaker looks back at his first year in office and outlines some of the traditional problems facing Speakers and Deputy Speakers.

The office of Deputy Speaker was created in 1885 when Parliament passed the *Deputy Speaker Act*. Its three main provisions were later incorporated into the *Speaker of the House of Commons Act*. The Speaker may call on the Deputy Speaker if he or she decides to leave the Chair briefly during the sittings. Secondly, if the Speaker should be absent at the beginning of a sitting, the Clerk informs the House that the absence of the Speaker is unavoidable. The Deputy Speaker then takes the Chair, presiding in the same way as the Speaker. Finally, a general provision confers on the Deputy Speaker all the power and authority of the Speaker to act in the absence of the Speaker. Section 53 of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons spells out in detail the responsibilities of the Deputy Speaker as Chairman of Committees of the Whole House.

A presiding officer is very much like a referee in a football game. He has to make decisions on the spot and the decisions have to be correct. Just like football, we now have television in the House of Commons and the replays can be devastating if the person in the Chair makes a bad decision. Members can be severely critical of his performance but they respect someone who is honestly trying to be fair and do a good job. Whoever presides tends to get the kind of respect that he or she deserves. I feel that I have good relationships with Members on both sides of the House.

My greatest difficulty as Deputy Speaker is that I represent Ottawa West, a constituency which is highly

sophisticated and places a very heavy service demand upon its Member of Parliament. Daily telephone calls are sometimes beyond belief although I do have an excellent staff to help me cope with them. My volume of correspondence is, I think, substantially more than that received by most Members of Parliament.

By tradition, the Deputy Speaker is not permitted to speak in the House of Commons. This means that in matters affecting the Public Service such as collective bargaining with staff associations I must remain silent in the House. I have spoken outside Parliament, usually in a non-partisan way, but this has not prevented me from stating that I firmly believe the legislation governing collective bargaining in the Public Service, mainly the *Public Service Staff Relations Act* and the *Public Service Employment Act*, are urgently in need of amendment. I have definite views of the kinds of amendments that would be appropriate. I feel no restriction in discussing them with my constituents.

My role as Deputy Speaker did not inhibit me when it came to amendments to the *Municipal Grants Act*. Along with other Ottawa MPs, I have been pressing for these for a number of years. When it was brought forward by the Minister of Finance, the bill was deficient in a number of respects, but it was better to take a half a loaf than none at all. I attended committee hearings when the bill was referred to the Miscellaneous Estimates Committee and I spoke on the subject. Again, I do not believe the nature of my representations were



partisan in the traditional sense. I did my best to represent my constituents.

During my first year in office I was in the Chair during three critical periods. First during the Throne Speech Debate when the Finance Minister introduced what the opposition considered a mini-budget. Second during the application of closure on a motion to send the constitutional proposals to a special joint committee. At first two, then six members of the Official Opposition stood in front of the Chair in an attempt to interrupt the vote on the motion. Finally I presided over much of the marathon twenty-three hour emergency debate on December 18-19, 1980.

These events gave me a reasonably high profile in my constituency. Nevertheless I cannot help but feel that my role as a Member of Parliament has changed. In the Christmas period I have traditionally been invited to a reception by the Public Service Staff Association; but not this year. In other subtle ways, people who expected me to speak vigorously and publicly on behalf of necessary changes have indicated some concern due to the role I now play in the House of Commons. This is rather a sensitive matter for me. I suspect a study of the political lives of Deputy Speakers throughout the Commonwealth would show their capacity to be re-elected is very definitely inhibited by the nature of the job.

Some thirteen years as a Member of Parliament has given me an opportunity to compare other parliamentary offices with my present position as Deputy Speaker. I was Parliamentary Secretary to the President of Treasury Board, to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, and served for a period as Chief Government Whip. Of these positions I would definitely put the Whip's job at the bottom of the scale of preference. It is a

totally impossible position, subject to pressures from all sources, and with very little scope for dealing with them. The Deputy Speaker, at least, has a measure of independence and a straightforward relationship with his colleagues in the House.

On the whole, I rate my experience in this Parliament, so far in three ways. As far as presiding in the Chair is concerned, I must say that I enjoy it. After thirteen years, I believe I have a reasonable knowledge of the rules and procedures of the House of Commons and I feel comfortable with them. In the second aspect, namely the telephone calls and correspondence with constituents, I do not believe that my relations have changed. I continue to answer my mail and deal with my telephone calls, I believe, as effectively as before.

The third aspect gives me most concern, namely my ability to publicly serve my constituents in the same way that I have in previous years. My inability, as Deputy Speaker, to speak in debate and participate in politically partisan discussions is definitely restrictive. The Deputy Speaker may or may not vote. When he was Deputy Speaker Mr. Lucien Lamoureux did not attend caucus, did not vote, and did not participate in any partisan activity. Mr. Hugh Faulkner adopted the same approach. Other Deputy Speakers have differed with this point of view.

When I first assumed my present post, I intended to be a faithful attendant at the Liberal Caucus and to vote regularly in the House of Commons. I attended a Convention of the Liberal Party in Winnipeg. More recently, however, I have cut back my voting record. I did not vote on the application of closure or time allocation. I have not voted on controversial bills over whose sittings I presided. It is not my intention to attend any more conferences of the Liberal Party or to participate in by-elections or similar events.

These matters are not spelled out in the rules. They involve the good judgment of the incumbent of the office. In my opinion good judgment implies that the Deputy Speaker must refrain from acts that would encourage opposition members of the House of Commons to regard him as politically partisan and therefore not a fit and proper person to preside over the proceedings. Confidence of members of the House is an indispensable prerequisite for presiding officers.

Is it possible to maintain the confidence of MPs in the House of Commons and also of voters when one is elected on a politically partisan ticket? Time will tell.