



FACT SHEET

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On the Job with a Member of Parliament

The polls have long since closed, the ballots counted and in some cases recounted. The results have been tallied and announced, giving some candidates reason to celebrate and others reason to reflect. Each federal election sends 295 Members of Parliament to the House of Commons. Waiting for them in the nation's capital is a job challenge as varied and complex as Canada itself.

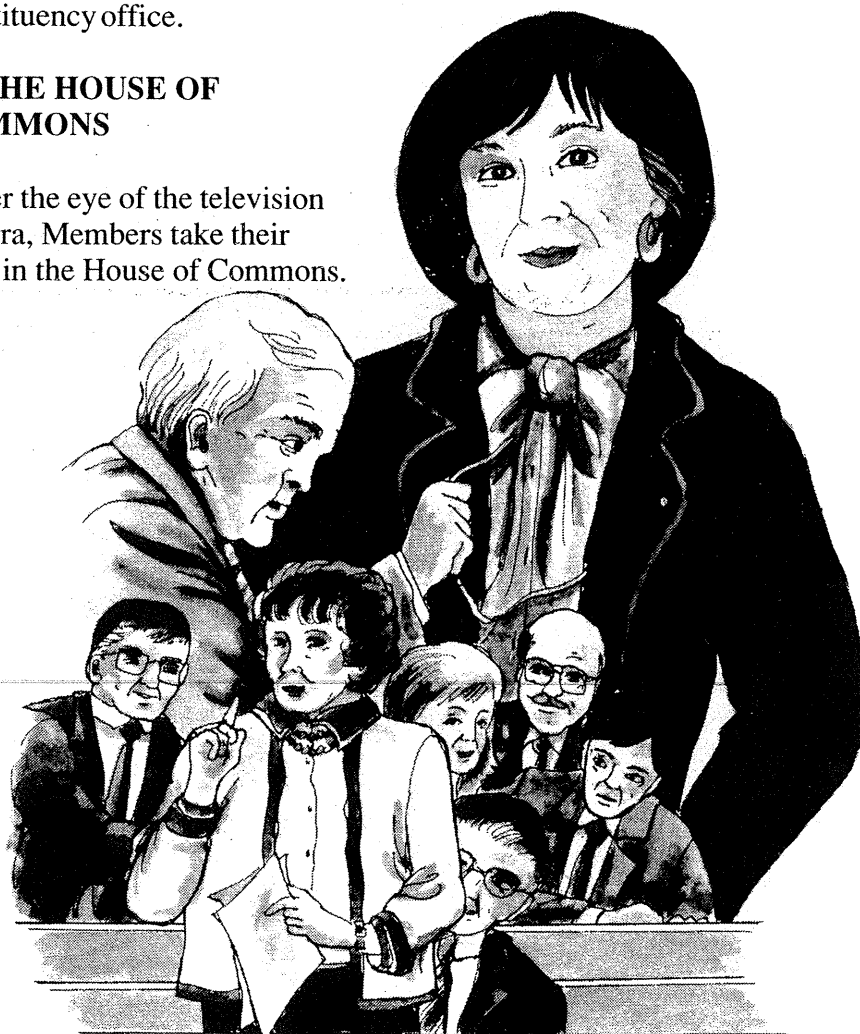
Legislator, negotiator, ombudsman, policy analyst, public speaker, social worker, diplomat and office manager are all job descriptions that characterize the work of an average Member.

"I always have to remember that I am first and foremost a representative of the people and accountable to those who elected me," says one Member of Parliament, who, like other Private Members, juggles a varied schedule of activities and responsibilities.

The Members' job takes them on a well-worn trail between the House of Commons Chamber, caucus and committee rooms, the parliamentary office and the constituency office.

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Under the eye of the television camera, Members take their seats in the House of Commons.



BARB WOOD

Debates in the House reflect the wide diversity of opinions among Members and their varied occupational, cultural and regional backgrounds. A Member's personal perspective and regional information can spark debates that shed new light on a bill, issue or policy.

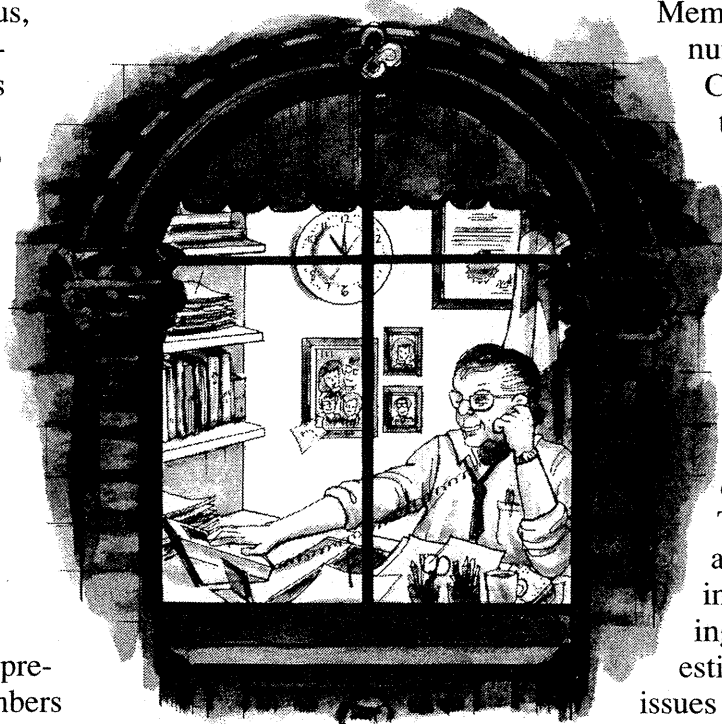
When examining a matter before Parliament, Members draw on the opinions of their constituents, the caucus, interest groups and regional needs as well as their own personal convictions. They also have access to consultants and research services that help them examine the many aspects of an issue.

In the legislative process, debates usually lead to a vote. Members vote for or against bills, or to amend them.

Although elected to represent constituents, Members must still work within the framework of a national party. Each party has its own position on a bill or issue and often Members must go against the wishes of their constituents or their own personal views to reach a consensus within the party. While they are always aware of the needs of their constituencies and regions, Members must work together to develop positions that serve the national interest.

When Members speak or ask questions in the House, they have an opportunity to present their constituents' views.

During the 45-minute Question Period, Members can ask Cabinet Ministers questions about government actions, programs and policies. The 15 minutes preceding Question Period are also reserved for statements by Members.



During this time, they can have a chance to draw attention to a subject of special importance to them and their constituents.

Members also act as legislators during Private Members' Business, when they can introduce their own bills. (Most bills considered in the House are government bills, which are introduced by Ministers.)

Sponsoring Private Members' bills gives Members the chance to bring issues to the attention of their colleagues and the public. Examples of Private Members' bills which have become law are the Non-Smokers' Health Act, the Act recognizing the Beaver as a symbol of the sovereignty of Canada, and the Centennial Flame Research Award Act.

Members spend a certain number of hours in the Chamber each week, but their duties also call them to committee rooms, parliamentary offices and the constituency.

COMMITTEES

The bulk of Members' parliamentary work is done in committee. There they study and amend bills, and examine departmental spending plans (known as estimates) and important issues in depth. Committee work requires Members to read background documents and meet experts in the field, including lawyers, economists, special interest groups, business persons and senior government officials.

In general, Members sit on at least two committees. There are about 20 permanent or "standing" committees and short-lived legislative commit-

tees whose lifespans are tied to consideration of specific legislation. Committees can sit from six to 40 hours per week and many must travel across the country to hear witnesses. Working on committees enables Members to study issues and legislation in greater detail than is possible in the Chamber.

CAUCUS

Caucus meetings are another stop on a Member's route. Every Wednesday morning when the House is in session, Members of the House of Commons and Senators meet in private in their respective parties' national caucuses. Here, they make the views of their constituents known, participate in parliamentary strategy and help develop the position of the caucus on subjects being debated in the House. Attendance at caucus meetings is considered so important that the House does not sit on Wednesday mornings to allow caucus meetings to take place. The regional caucuses of all parties also meet once a week before the national caucus.

THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE

A mountain of correspondence and telephone messages can pile up in the Member's parliamentary office in Ottawa. One Opposition Member says she follows up on these matters "before and after the House, especially in the evening when things are quieter and there are fewer things to bother me."

Members act as "ombudsmen" for their constituents by helping them deal with federal government departments. Constituents often ask their Member for help in getting visas or passports, or in solving problems concerning unemployment insurance, pensions or income tax.

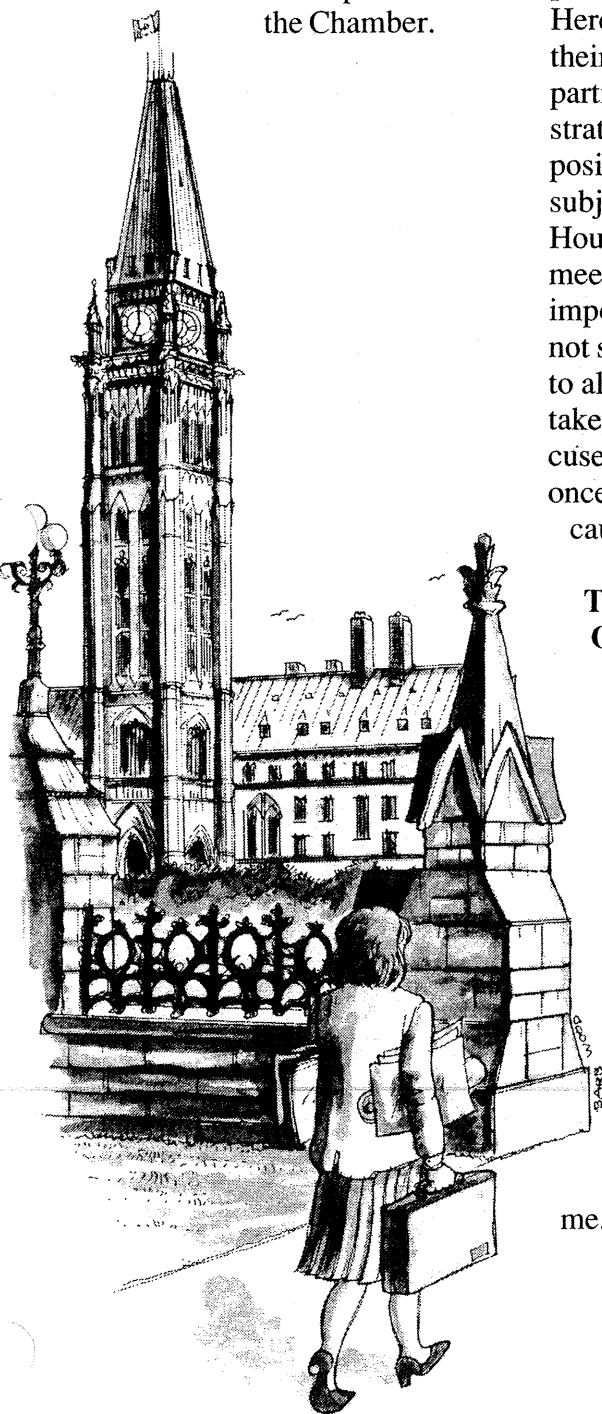
A Member's typical day includes meetings with the media, constituents and interest groups. The parliamentary office must be well managed to make the most of this ever-changing schedule. But Members are supported by staff who work long hours researching issues, giving advice for their speeches in the House, and addressing constituents' questions.

THE CONSTITUENCY OFFICE

"You have to love people and have an iron constitution to effectively meet the demands of the constituency office," revealed a veteran MP.

Some Members from large or highly populated constituencies have more than one office to visit. Their time in the constituency gives them a chance to hear their constituents' ideas and plans and help with their problems.

Work in the constituency also involves social and political obligations: Members must attend various activities, social





functions, celebrations and opening ceremonies. They usually take the opportunity to speak to local media while in the constituency as well.

PERSONAL TIME

In the midst of all this activity, Members try to find time for themselves and their families. Many maintain residences in Ottawa and in the constituency that elected them. For Members from British Columbia or Newfoundland, for example, the distance between the parliamentary office and their home in the constituency is long, involving two planes and several hours by car. The time

Members spend travelling from one place to another, added to an already full schedule, leaves them very little personal time.

FROM A MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE

In their work, Members must make decisions on national issues, meet many people with many concerns and study complex subjects. As one back-bencher admitted, "You have to believe you can improve the country's situation; if everyone gave up, what would be left? If I have settled a problem for my constituents, I feel useful, I feel I have accomplished something."

GETTING IN TOUCH

You can contact your Member of Parliament through his or her constituency office. Consult the blue pages of your telephone directory or contact the Public Information Office, House of Commons at (613) 992-4793, TDD (613) 995-2266.