



**Canadian  
Study  
of Parliament  
Group**

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**PARTY CAUCUSES:  
*Behind Closed Doors***

**Ottawa  
November 21 – 22, 1997**

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The Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG) was created with the object of bringing together all those with an interest in parliamentary institutions and the legislative process, to promote understanding and to contribute to their reform and improvement.

The constitution of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group makes provision for various activities, including the organization of seminars in Ottawa and elsewhere in Canada, the preparation of articles and various publications, the establishment of workshops, the promotion and organization of public discussions on parliamentary affairs, participation in public affairs programs on radio and television, and the sponsorship of other educational activities.

Membership is open to all those interested in Canadian legislative institutions.

Applications for membership and additional information concerning the Group should be addressed to the Secretariat, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, Box 660, West Block, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6. Tel: (613) 996-0707, Fax: (613) 992-3674.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On Friday evening, November 21 and Saturday, November 22, 1997, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a conference in Ottawa on the theme *Party Caucuses : Behind Closed Doors*.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who contributed so much to the success of the conference. A special thanks to the two keynote speakers : Paul Thomas, Professor at the University of Manitoba and Senator Sharon Carstairs, Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate. Thank you also to the panellists and the moderators who participated in the two plenary sessions, as well as the Chairs and participants in the four workshops: Bloc Québécois MP Madeleine Dalphond-Guiral; Former MPs Albert Cooper, Marlene Cowling, Ron MacDonald and Ray Speaker; Maureen Boyd, consultant; Cynthia Callard, Executive Director, Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada; Richard Cléroux, Journalist; and David Miller, Senior Vice-President, Hill and Knowlton.

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Charles Robert  
Conference Chair and  
Counsellor, Canadian Study of  
Parliament Group



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**Keynote Address by  
Professor Paul Thomas  
University of Manitoba**

***Caucus and Representation  
in Canada***

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The Conference opened with an address by Paul G. Thomas, Professor of Political Studies at the University of Manitoba, in which he examined caucus and representation in Canada.

Political parties are central to an understanding of Parliament - its functions, its traditions and internal culture, its organization and procedures, and most of the behaviour of its members.

Political parties help to organize public opinion and to set directions for public policy. They act as giant personnel agencies for the recruitment, election and placement of people in public offices. The most successful parties are expected to provide leadership and initiative in government, whereas the less successful parties are expected to provide an institutionalized opposition. No one would argue that Canadian political parties perform these and other functions within the political system perfectly. But there is no disputing the fact that parties dominate Parliament.

In his years of interviewing on Parliament Hill, Professor Thomas has been struck by how frequently MPs use a sports metaphor to describe the parliamentary process. Parliament is seen as an arena for the clash between opposing teams. While the players do not actually wear uniforms, everyone knows whose side they are on. As with sports teams, within the parties there are first, second and even third string players. Each team enters the arena with a game plan, consisting of its priorities, strategies and tactics for the session. Teams "huddle" in secret caucuses before and during the game to reach agreement on "play selections". Players who fail to run assigned play patterns are ostracized by their teammates and could

be "cut from the line-up" (expelled from caucus and denied the party nomination).

Professor Thomas noted that for any game, there must be rules and in the case of Parliament the rules are both written (the Standing Orders) and unwritten (parliamentary practices and traditions). The most exciting play usually takes place in Question Period or in the media scrum following that event. This is the play usually featured on the nightly TV news. Finally, as in the world of sports, there are the inevitable "Monday morning quarterbacks" (celebrity journalists, think tank representatives and pointy-headed academics) who are always ready to second-guess the choices of plays and thereby contribute to the prevalent mood of disillusionment with government.

Professor Thomas argued that reliance upon the sports metaphor trivializes the parliamentary process by implying that it is all a game, that only winning counts and that nothing substantive is at stake. However, the popularity of the metaphor symbolizes the extent to which the constitutional and institutional foundations of cabinet-parliamentary government combine to encourage party solidarity and discipline.

Professor Thomas noted that despite the central importance of parties to both the theory and practice of cabinet-parliamentary government, there is surprisingly little written about their organization for parliamentary purposes. Other components of the parliamentary party structures, which have not been carefully studied, include House Leaders, Shadow Cabinets, Caucus Research Offices and Whips.

Professor Thomas argued that from the outset it needs to be emphasized that not all-party caucuses perform the same functions or exhibit the same dynamics over time. The variability among caucuses, in terms of both structures and processes is influenced by a number of factors such as: whether the party is currently in or out of power; whether its history consists of being mainly on the government or the opposition side of the House of Commons; whether the

governing party has a large majority, slim majority or is in a minority-government position; the size of the caucus and its regional composition; whether the party subscribes to a mandate, delegate or other theory of representation; the operating style of the party leader; the traditions and internal political culture of the caucus; the nature of the issues on the agenda of Parliament; the current standing of the party in terms of public opinion; and the pattern of party representation and the dynamic of party competition within the House of Commons. Adding to these factors the mix of personalities shows why party caucuses are very human and fluid institutions.

Given this variety, generalizations about party caucuses are hazardous. Nonetheless, Professor Thomas presented four main propositions about party caucuses that can be useful in assessing their development and significance.

The first proposition is that during the past three decades caucus influence has grown from what it was during earlier periods. Based on the occasional references to caucus opinion found in political biographies, Professor Thomas argued that contemporary caucuses have more opportunities and organizational capabilities to register their opinions and to call the party leadership to account than did caucuses of the 1950s and 1960s. He added that the opportunities for the government caucus to exert and influence are greater than that of any opposition caucus.

In the case of the governing caucus, there is an opportunity to influence the development of policy. Caucus serves as a sounding board for ministers' policies. Many of the best debates on public policy take place within the privacy of the governing caucus. In addition to helping shape the climate of opinion in which legislation is drafted, caucus discussions can lead to delay, modification and even the abandonment of bills presented by ministers.

Since opposition parties do not actually control policy, the focus of their caucus meetings is more on the development

of parliamentary strategies and tactics. In order to present a unified reaction to government initiatives, they have to seek the reconciliation of competing ideological, policy and regional viewpoints.

The second proposition is that party caucuses are important forums for the expression of regional viewpoints and the containment of regional conflict in national political life. Professor Thomas used the term regionalism to refer both to the distinctive character of defined geographic areas and to peoples' perceptions of, and identification with, such places.

The alleged failure of national parties to represent adequately the interests of the peripheries and the dominance of Central Canada over national policies is a long-standing theme in Canadian politics. Constitutional and institutional arrangements and procedures help to create the public perception of widespread and severe interregional conflicts. The electoral system is also to blame. For long periods during Canadian history, a negative consequence of the electoral system has been to create the image of a highly regionalized party system in which whole sections of the country are excluded from the governing process because the ruling party has not achieved balanced parliamentary representation. However, Professor Thomas looked at this problem in two studies and concluded that the electoral system was a contributing factor to regional tensions, but it did not conjure up regional discontent where none would otherwise exist.

Professor Thomas argued that reforms to the electoral system, like some modified version of proportional representation for the House of Commons, would likely produce better regional balance in party caucuses and might reduce somewhat the sense of exclusion felt by people in the smaller provinces. However, no system of proportional representation could give Manitoba as many seats as Ontario and there would still be the suspicion that Manitoba continued to take a back seat to Ontario and Quebec in national decision-making.

An elected Senate, depending upon how it was chosen, is an alternative way that a stronger sense of regional fairness might be promoted. Professor Thomas argued for relatively modest powers to avoid making the Senate into a second forum of confidence. The recommendation is based on a review of the roles of elected upper houses in Australia and the United States and on two rounds of interviews (in 1985 and 1991) with Canadian parliamentarians about the roles of regional caucuses. For some time, governing parties in Canada have operated a system of regional, provincial and even local caucuses for major cities. Despite being the largest or the second largest caucus, Ontario MPs were not very successful during either the Trudeau or the Mulroney years in pushing their agenda within national caucus and cabinet. There are a variety of explanations for this apparent failure, but Professor Thomas noted that they seem to come down to a lack of leadership, coherence and a consistent focus. The Quebec and Alberta caucuses were more consistently influential during both governments.

Clearly there is competition among regions within the confines of national party caucuses. However, contrary to the popular stereotype of a country and of national parties racked by regional disagreements, the number of issues that divided caucuses along regional lines were relatively few — according to the MPs interviewed in 1985 and 1991. When asked to identify regionally divisive issues, MPs from all parties volunteered the same short list of examples - official bilingualism, the Meech Lake Accord, etc. It is often suggested that many of these issues pitted the West against Quebec and that the West always lost. In actual fact the West was seldom unified on the issues.

In summary, there is more regional input into party discussions than is popularly assumed. For Professor Thomas, all of this raises the interesting question of how far we should go with electoral reform and/or Senate reform as a response to regional alienation caused by a small number of emotional issues.

The third proposition is that caucuses are more an exercise in social psychology than a forum for policy deliberations. Caucus meetings contribute to party solidarity in terms of voting and other behavior in Parliament. The freewheeling debates that take place in caucus are a way of letting off steam. Participation in caucus discussions can be educational for individuals because they are forced to recognize the existence of different ideological, policy, regional and other perspectives. Under skillful leadership, caucuses become working partnerships. But caucus influence is often indirect, subtle and not easily measured.

Structural and process arrangements clearly play a role in the successful political management of caucus. Over time caucus structures have become more complicated, reflecting both the more specialized nature of contemporary policy-making and the need to create new avenues of involvement. For example, during the first Chrétien government, the 98-member Ontario caucus operated five sub-caucuses. Another interesting and recent development which has escaped much notice is the rise of all party caucuses.

Because caucuses are really complicated processes in social psychology, it follows that leaders must pay careful attention to the role of incentives to keep members both happy and productive. Such incentives can be either material (grants, programs, positions, offices) or psychological (recognition, encouragement, empathy etc.) For a Prime Minister the use of psychological rewards to keep restless backbenchers “onside” can be crucial. Most of what is called party discipline consists of self-discipline by MPs and Senators who recognize they are part of a team, according to Professor Thomas. Party caucuses are not meant to be academic seminars. Their role is not to find “the optimal” policies in substantive terms, but rather to find policies which will help with current problems.

The fourth and final proposition involves the often unnoticed connection between caucus reform and parliamentary reform. Professor Thomas argued that there is an inverse relationship between the strength of party caucuses and the independence of Parliament from executive dominance. This equation applies mainly, but not exclusively, to the government caucus. Enlargement of the role of the governing party caucus may undermine parliamentary reforms designed to grant individual MPs and Senators more freedom in the open arena of the parliamentary process. For example, adoption of the popular idea of more “free” votes would lead governments to work harder with caucus to convince MPs to follow the party line, in part because widespread dissent would be interpreted as a sign of weak leadership.

Professor Thomas concluded by proposing some modest improvement to caucus operations such as: the inclusion of a Chief Whip in Cabinet or having the Chairperson of national caucus serve on the cabinet committee on legislation and House planning; having policy committees and/or regional caucuses prepare and circulate reports on legislation and other issues, with such documents released after caucus decisions have been made in order to demonstrate that policy debate is alive within the parties; devoting more party funds to the development and discussion of policy options, rather than spending most of the party’s funds on polling, marketing and communications strategies; and the development of the practice of having public servants brief the caucuses of all parties, subject to published guidelines about which areas of discussion are considered “out of bounds”.

At present, Professor Thomas noted, a vicious cycle seems to prevail: MPs are convinced that presenting their views is futile and do not take full advantage of the available policy opportunities. In turn, their nonparticipation is taken as evidence of apathy or indifference by the party leadership, whose views therefore prevail.

In the present Parliament with five recognized parties, there seems to be no truly national parties. The fragmentation or balkanization reflected in Parliament has led to renewed talk about the adoption of some modified version of proportional representation. But Professor Thomas’ position on electoral reform is ambivalent. There is no guarantee that having spokespersons from all regions in the governing caucus will produce the desired perception of fairness in public policy. Finally, there is the question of whether the representational imbalances in the present Parliament are created by the electoral system or simply reflect the political fragmentation of the country.

Professor Thomas recognized that electoral reform involves more than solving “the regional problem”; it is also about electoral fairness to smaller parties and to individual voters. However, in his view, Senate reform is a more promising avenue of change in terms of creating visible evidence of regional views being regularly accommodated in national policy-making.

*Rapporteur: Caroline Lemieux*

**Speech by  
Senator Sharon Carstairs  
Deputy Leader of the Government  
in the Senate**

***From Provincial Caucus to the  
Senate***

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When Sharon Carstairs was elected in 1984, she was the sole member of the Liberal Party in the Manitoba Legislature. The party itself received only 5.8% of the provincial vote.

Thus, the entire Liberal Caucus was comprised of Sharon Carstairs.

Mrs. Carstairs said that caucus meetings were extremely simple; they even took place in the bathroom. While brushing her teeth, she would simply look into the mirror and ask her caucus, "What are we going to say about this issue?" and caucus would supply an answer. And Mrs. Carstairs would agree.

One such example was the issue of standardized testing in schools. As a teacher of 20 years, Mrs. Carstairs was theoretically not opposed to standardized tests. On the other hand, she was not in favour of using the standardized tests to evaluate teachers or curriculum, but only to determine where teachers needed resources. Once she had finished debating with herself, that quickly became Liberal policy.

Caucus was a relaxed event, even delightful.

**Election 1988**

However, in 1988, much changed. Caucus grew from one to twenty members, becoming, according to Mrs. Carstairs, like an adult daycare centre.

The new caucus team was comprised of members who had never been inside the legislature, and most of whom could not believe they would be elected. She recounted a story about the lack of confidence of Liberal candidates: on the day before the election, Mrs. Carstairs hand delivered red roses to each of the Winnipeg MLA candidates (60% of her caucus was from Winnipeg). One such MLA hopeful, Ed, was outside his home in blue jeans and cowboy boots carrying a hammer when Mrs. Carstairs arrived. She asked him, "What are you doing at home on the eve of the election?" He replied that he was setting up election signs. She asked, "How many workers do you have, Ed?" "Four," he replied. She asked, "How much money have you spent on your campaign, Ed?" "Oh, only about \$2,000," he said. Yet, with this limited expectation of victory and minimal effort, Ed won by a plurality of 2,000 votes.

Upon hearing the election results, Mrs. Carstairs was astonished. In fact, she has since seen her expression at that revelatory moment on video, without audio, which unmistakably describes her thoughts as "What the hell do I do now?"

She is relieved, in hindsight, that she did not succeed in becoming Premier. She simply would not have known what to do.

**Building cohesion**

Mrs. Carstairs found that moulding cohesion in caucus was her most challenging job. This included the task of melding together individuals who never spoke, those who had to speak on everything, and still others who would only discuss carefully selected topics. But the most difficult members to incorporate were former city counsellors. With political but absolutely no caucus experience, they believed that they could be free-spirited in their comments. If they disagreed with caucus, they would leave the caucus chamber to inform the media about their stand-alone position. Carstairs said it took several long meetings before caucus discipline was truly understood.

Other members were leader worshipers. To them, no matter what, the leader was always right. Mrs. Carstairs said this type of MLA is not helpful. A leader needs to get the bad news in caucus; she needs ideas from the outside world. A different point of view is essential for functioning as an effective leader. She remembers one instance when a MLA expressed one perspective to caucus. Carstairs spoke after him and disagreed with the MLA's position. He then stated, "I agree with Sharon", despite having just stated a diametrically opposite point of view!

In 1992, caucus shrunk from 20 members to seven. Mrs. Carstairs said that they could have developed the initial twenty into a family, but they only had two years and were beset by the Meech Lake Accord.

A great caucus, she says, is like a family. She gave one example of a MLA who stated in caucus that he could not in good conscience support a bill prepared by a Liberal colleague which was to be voted upon in the Legislature that day. Accordingly, he said he would absent himself from the legislature during the vote, rather than oppose the efforts of his fellow Liberal and friend. Yet, Mrs. Carstairs saw him in the legislature immediately prior to the vote being called. She asked him why he had changed his mind, and would now attend the vote and support the bill. He replied, "Kevin has worked so hard, that I can't *not* support him as a friend."

### **Senate Caucuses**

Mrs. Carstairs said that Senate caucus is a very different experience from that of the Manitoba legislature. There are many different caucuses. In fact, Mrs. Carstairs said there are too many caucuses, pointing out that she does not want to spend her day talking only to Liberals; she wants to talk to people with other points of view as well. She also suggested that the number of Liberal caucuses in the Senate is not helpful, because it does not allow for a broader understanding of the various interests and perspectives of its members.

When the Liberals came to power in the House of Commons in 1993, they had a minority in the Senate. Now they constitute a majority and by the end of 1998, there will be 57 Liberals, 43 Conservatives, and 4 Independents in the Senate. Mrs. Carstairs does not deem this Liberal domination of the second House helpful either.

### **Caucus Experience and Recommendations**

Mrs. Carstairs' caucus experience, thus far, has been a good one: an opportunity to build life-long friends, and positive regarding her ability to influence the ideas of others. However, she said that caucus occupies too much of a representative's time. She believes that it should only be a small part of the whole democratic experience. Mrs. Carstairs would like to see more dialogue between Members of Parliament on an informal basis. Even within caucus sessions, the dynamic is such that if a leader is there, MPs are very well behaved. If the leader is not there, it becomes a game of "when the cat's away, the mice will play." Caucus often becomes a raucous complaint session rather than a constructive dialogue.

Mrs. Carstairs opined that leaders don't need to be told how wonderful they are, but they do need information about what is happening in the constituencies. In general, leaders don't object to MPs being very vocal in caucus about their position, particularly if it is heartfelt. But this does not happen frequently enough. Regrettably, there is a significant lack of vigorous debate.

*Rapporteur: Gillian Slaughter*

## Plenary Session

### *How caucuses work in each of the parties: Structure and role*

#### Moderator

**Maureen Boyd**  
Consultant

#### Panellists

**Albert Cooper**  
Former Progressive Conservative  
Member of Parliament

**Madeleine Dalphond-Guiral**  
Bloc Québécois  
Member of Parliament (Laval Centre)

**Ron MacDonald**  
Senior Counsel  
Government Policy Consultants  
and Former Liberal Party  
Member of Parliament

**Ray Speaker**  
Former Reform Party  
Member of Parliament

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Maureen Boyd introduced the panellists and initiated the discussion by commenting on the perception of mystery that often surrounds party caucuses and the subsequent discourse that occurs “behind closed doors”. The panellists were thus invited to shed some light on this aspect of party discussion by relaying their own experiences within their respective caucus.

#### Albert Cooper

Albert Cooper began the discussion by commenting on the discrepancy that exists between the reality of the life as an MP and the popular image of an elected official. He characterized caucus as being a dynamic and exciting environment, a place to engage in serious discussion. Whereas it is often

believed that MPs are restricted in their ability to act as individuals in a process where group cohesion is critical, Mr. Cooper distinguished caucus from this notion, citing it as a place where an individual with an idea can have an actual impact.

National, regional and special issue caucuses (formed for such topics as abortion and health care), were all described as being different types of caucuses. A strong, united caucus was deemed to be critical to the effectiveness of the particular group and the impact it could have on an issue. Mr. Cooper explained that while heated arguments could occur in meetings behind closed doors, an attempt had to be made to come to an eventual consensus. An oath of secrecy was highlighted as being critical to assure openness and frankness of debate within caucus discussions.

Described as being a dynamic and often challenging milieu, caucus was also portrayed as being a tough environment. Rather than simply being a setting in which to express one’s own opinions and concerns, Mr. Cooper described caucus as a place to both listen and learn. In such a setting, the importance of the caucus Chair is key to holding the group together and acting as an anchor to unify the members. As an example, Mr. Cooper cited the GST debate that occurred during his time as a Conservative caucus member. The period was described as being an extremely difficult one given the controversy and the public aggression surrounding the issue. He described former Prime Minister Mulroney as being central to the discussions within caucus at that time, keeping the members together despite the heated controversy about the GST. In explaining how the former Prime Minister managed to keep the caucus united, he described Mulroney’s success in transforming the difficulties of caucus into a vision they could follow and into a larger goal they could work towards as a group. As such, Mulroney succeeded in moving the group forward and demonstrated leadership in that capacity.

Meeting as equals in caucus is essential, and Mr. Cooper noted that even

Cabinet Ministers must remember this notion and are not protected by virtue of their position. Indeed they can be subject to a greater degree of “targeting” given their portfolios and the responsibility associated with such involvement in the executive. As an example, Mr. Cooper described Don Mazankowski as an individual who managed to retain this concept of equality in his approach to caucus, never acting out of step with his peers nor moving ahead without the support of caucus.

As a final note, Mr. Cooper reminded the audience that only the strong survive within caucus. He also expressed his belief that caucus is the most dynamic component of the political process. He closed by commenting that one’s role in caucus can make or break a career and that being well-prepared for caucus discussions, in order to participate fully and substantively in the activities, can only strengthen one’s prospects for significant presence and impact in the larger process and political dynamic.

### **Madeleine Dalphond-Guiral**

It should be noted that Ms. Dalphond-Guiral was the only guest who is currently a member of the House.

She began by informing us of the results of a little research done into the meaning of the word “caucus”. The first surprise is that this word does not appear in French dictionaries. In English dictionaries, there are two meanings given, depending on the geographic location. In the United States, the expression “caucus” refers to the American Senate. In the United Kingdom, it is used to refer to a secret meeting. Here, the expression obviously refers to meetings of elected representatives of the various political parties.

Three topics were addressed in the presentation: the functions and types of caucuses within the Bloc Québécois and the maturity level of the caucuses. Ms. Dalphond-Guiral compared the caucuses to a bedroom where there are a lot of parliamentarians: rules are needed to

manage this “intimate space” properly. The most important, in her view, is to get there on time, out of respect for all the other members. The BQ caucus is managed by a chairperson who is elected by all of the MPs, to ensure that he or she has the support of everyone. The chairperson has two assistants.

There are three types of caucus within the Bloc Québécois. The first is daily. It is generally held in the early afternoon, before question period. While the daily caucus is used mainly to prepare for question period, it is also an opportunity for members to speak on various issues of concern to them. Bloc Québécois MPs also sometimes meet in special caucus, usually to consider a specific bill, such as the *Firearms Control Act*, for example. Lastly, there are pre-session caucuses, which precede the resumption of Parliament in September and February. These caucuses, which last a day and a half or two days, provide an opportunity to review the preceding session and, most importantly, to establish strategies and directions for the upcoming session.

Ms. Dalphond-Guiral set out three fundamental qualities that reflect the maturity of a caucus. The first is discretion. Without discretion, it is difficult for members to come in and discuss things and to achieve an acceptable level of solidarity. Honesty is the second quality. “Telling the truth” is an essential prerequisite for the smooth operation and effectiveness of caucus proceedings. And of course the truth must be told, but it must also be told respectfully. Respect, the third fundamental quality, is what makes it possible to achieve what Ms. Dalphond-Guiral calls the “politics of honour”.

In addition to cultivating these qualities, it is important that caucus keep strictly to a rigorous analysis of the issues and problems that come up and that its members keep their claws sheathed so as to reduce any tensions that may arise. Life in caucus is not without its hidden pitfalls. It is actually not uncommon for serious differences of analysis and opinion to appear. The very different circumstances of every MP must also be taken into account and recognized. Given the varied composition

and interests of different ridings, compromises must often be made. It is precisely at these times that the three fundamental qualities are most essential.

To summarize, a caucus is like a Spanish inn: what you bring to it is what you get. The more mature a caucus, the better able it is to generate more ideas and be more useful to the party.

Ms. Dalphond-Guiral concluded by saying that the members of a caucus owe it to themselves to be fundamental agents of the politics of honour.

### **Ron MacDonald**

Ron MacDonald began his commentary by mentioning the significance of differences between the party and the caucus with respect to their structure and internal dynamics. He suggested that caucus discussion in opposition can be more stimulating than in government as Members are not constrained by what was described as the trappings of power and the limits imposed by the bureaucracy. An opposition caucus thereby enjoys more freedom and flexibility compared to their government counterpart. The role of the bureaucracy as an originator of policy options, and of the executive as agenda-setter for government were cited as key reasons for the greater flexibility in opposition.

Mr. MacDonald explained that in a nation where regional considerations continue to permeate the political landscape, Members can use caucus as an opportunity to learn about the common points among regions in order to bridge the divide that often frustrates discussions of regional concern. Mr. MacDonald cautioned that national caucuses should not ignore regional concerns, but rather should always consider the impact that certain policy decisions can hold for particular areas of the country. The example of harmonised GST was given, and described as being a national policy with a singular impact in the Atlantic provinces.

Mr. MacDonald affirmed that MPs must be able to feel that their opinions are being heard within caucus, thereby stressing the central roles of mutual respect and communication to the success of the process. He also emphasized the idea that caucus is not simply for the expression of one's own opinions, but is also the place to learn, listen, understand, and develop, through the sharing of differing points of view.

Referring to his own experiences, he relayed the feeling of changing personally, as he learned and absorbed more and more from the dynamism of the caucus environment, its diversity and richness of opinion. Privacy and the need to respect confidentiality and secrecy are central to the creation and maintenance of such sharing and openness in discussions. Mr. MacDonald deemed it critical for the Prime Minister to proceed with his or her agenda working within the caucus atmosphere of openness and diversity, and former Prime Minister Mulroney was used as an example of a leader who understood the role of caucus and the need to form a united front despite differences of opinion and varied concerns.

Finally, Mr. MacDonald commented on what he deemed to be a disturbing trend. Some of the best advice government can get originates not from the bureaucracy but rather from those who have served within caucus from across the nation. This fact is often overlooked. Caucus members can often provide a wealth of information and insight that can assist the government in the process of policy development.

### **Ray Speaker**

Mr. Speaker, who was a member of the Alberta provincial legislature for 28 years and a Reform MP at the federal level for nearly four years, told us about his numerous experiences in caucus. He was first elected in 1963 as a member of the Social Credit Party in Alberta, which was then the party in power. He recalled that at that time the

caucus was not really organized. Although the caucus had the opportunity to express itself on the budget and important bills, most decisions were made by Cabinet. Once Social Credit became the opposition, after the Conservative victory in 1971, it was incapable of adapting to its new role. The caucus continued to act as if it were still in power and it was never able to put the Government on the defensive.

After being elected as an independent MP and then as leader of the Representative Party, which had only two elected members, Mr. Speaker was part of the Conservative Cabinet between 1989 and 1992. In the early 1980s, Conservative Premier Peter Lougheed decided that caucus members should play a greater role in setting the policy of the government. Committees were established within the caucus, and after that all members of caucus were to be equals. This initiative had major consequences for the government, since each vote taken in caucus became government policy.

On the federal scene, Mr. Speaker believes that the experience in the Reform Party caucus over the last four years is a perfect illustration of how a group of idealists dealt with the constraints of Parliament. Rebelling somewhat against the hierarchical structure of traditional parties, the Reform caucus first wanted to democratize its own internal structures. One of the methods of achieving this was to establish clusters of critics instead of the traditional shadow cabinet. Although this allowed all members to feel they were equal, the results were not very conclusive. Two problems arose: (1) even though each cluster of critics elected a coordinator, without the official sanction of the leader of the Party they did not have sufficient authority to make crucial decisions; and (2) the effect of this structure was to create confusion in the media. Because there was no single critic, journalists did not know which MP to talk to in order to get an official reaction.

The caucus therefore altered its structures in 1994: the number of critics was cut and three umbrella committees were created (industry, social affairs and finance). During that period, the caucus also adopted a set of principles to guide its proceedings (member equality, equal opportunity, etc.) and two rules relating to decision-making in caucus: (1) an MP may ask for a vote to be public if he or she has the support of enough colleagues; and (2) an MP may abstain from voting or vote against the majority of caucus if the MP can demonstrate that his or her position reflects the wishes of his or her constituency.

Throughout his speech, Mr. Speaker stressed two factors, which he viewed as essential, from his experience, if there is to be effective leadership within a caucus. First, it is important that the members of caucus be given meaningful responsibilities: if the members are regarded as mere spectators to the decisions made by Cabinet or party leaders, they will act like mere spectators.

The second factor relates to the role of the leader of a party. The leader absolutely must be able to understand the behaviour and dynamics within his or her caucus in order to be able to create an environment in which dissent is permitted and consensus is the rule. The exercise of leadership must not be synonymous with imposing authority. Decision-making must be the result of a dialogue among all members. No caucus can maintain discipline and unity by using the "carrot and stick". These objectives, according to Mr. Speaker, can be achieved only by giving everyone the opportunity to express their potential, by sharing public recognition and creating a spirit of camaraderie.

*Rapporteurs: Caroline Hilt and  
Jennifer Khurana*

## **Summary Plenary Session**

### **Moderator**

**Maureen Boyd**  
Consultant

### **Panellists**

**Cynthia Callard**  
Executive Director  
Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada

**Richard Cl  roux**  
Journalist and Member of the Canadian  
Parliamentary Press Gallery

**Marlene Cowling**  
Former Liberal Party  
Member of Parliament

**David Miller**  
Senior Vice-President  
Hill and Knowlton

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All four panellists gave a brief overview of what took place in his or her respective workshop.

### **Cynthia Callard** ***Caucus and Interest Groups***

Cynthia Callard began by speaking briefly about her experience working as a staffer in caucus. She told the audience that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) want to learn about caucuses and that this interest on the part of NGOs can make non-ministers feel more important.

Earlier in the day, her group had explored several issues and reached the following conclusions:

- NGOs act as researchers for parties and other actors.

- NGOs do not have to compromise. Caucus members, on the other hand, do.
- NGOs get media attention that Members of Parliament do not often get.
- Some weaker NGOs depend on Members of Parliament to advance their concerns in caucus; and some backbenchers benefit from alliances with NGOs because the support of NGOs helps advance their own concerns.
- Different NGOs and parties have different types of relationships.
- Weakening caucus solidarity provides an opening for special-interest groups to influence.
- There are caucuses of sorts within the NGO community when NGOs work in coalitions.

### **Richard Cl  roux** ***Caucus and the Media***

The first half of this workshop looked at the question of how to deal with the media. The workshop came up with a list of considerations for parliamentary officials who deal with the media:

- Do not view the media as an adversary. View the media as a way to get your message out.
- Maintain your relationship with the media with dignity and integrity. Never lie - a lie makes for an automatic story!
- The media constitute a public forum. (Consider Dennis Mills and his proposed flat tax, for example. If he had been unable to talk to the media about this matter, he would have had no hope whatsoever of seeing this proposal come to life in the form of a policy.)

- Caucus privacy is breaking down. Twenty years ago, for instance, federal caucuses did not want journalists to be waiting outside the room in which the caucus was meeting. Now, caucuses advertise their meetings.
- No one person controls the media. Reporters make up their own minds (even though the editor has the final say).
- Remember your party solidarity. Do not contradict your leader, as the media will jump on this. If you want to give a different point of view, discuss this with your leader first.
- Journalists will never forgive you if they think you are using them.

The second half of the workshop examined several concepts. Workshop members reached the following conclusions:

- Cabinet committees have replaced committees.
- Perhaps the maximum number of people who should be in caucus is 12.
- We are witnessing increasing openness of caucus.
- Access-to-Information measures have not yet penetrated caucus.
- Caucuses devote a great deal of time and energy to Question Period.
- In order to address a disturbing level of public disrespect for Parliament, perhaps the media should cover committee meetings more often.

Mr. Cl  roux reported on one subject that was not discussed in the workshop, the administrative decision to discontinue the hardcopy printing of committee transcripts of meetings. The Press Gallery protested and encouraged other groups to join them in their objections. According to Mr. Cl  roux, no one

listened, the House of Commons was more intent on achieving cost reductions. He did note, however, that journalists can circumvent this inconvenience by obtaining "blues" of committee meetings from committee clerks.

### **Marlene Cowling** ***Issues and Regional Caucus***

This workshop focused on government caucuses, largely because there are so many government caucuses. What follow are some issues and questions raised during the workshop:

- Participants in the workshop concluded that virtually all new Members of Parliament come to Parliament Hill with a great deal of idealism.
- Regional caucuses play a significant role in the electoral platform of a party.
- Issues raised by regional caucuses sometimes initiate government policy.
- Should the media attend caucus or should caucus meetings be held in secret? Workshop participants could not reach a consensus on this matter.

Ms. Cowling left conference participants with the following question: How can the average citizen have the opportunity to understand the role of regional caucus and national caucus without destroying what happens behind closed doors?

### **David Miller** ***Caucus and Business Groups***

This workshop focused on business' relationship with caucus. Participants reached the following conclusions:

- Business does not give caucus high priority.
- Business is used to dealing with "decision-makers."

- Businesses tend not to go to Members of Parliament in the first instance - only as a last resort.
- Insofar as business does deal with caucus, it tends to focus on regional and provincial caucuses.
- The way that business deals with the opposition has changed over the years. Business used to brief opposition more; this changed in the last Parliament, largely because business was reticent to deal with the Bloc Québécois (as they felt that dealing with the Bloc was traitorous).
- Participants in the workshop had mixed views on whether cross-party caucuses are useful.
- When asked if business groups have greater access than other groups to caucuses, participants stated that this depends on the situation.
- Workshop participants also had difficulty in determining whether caucuses are the most serious debating groups in Parliament.
- Finally, participants concluded that government caucuses are more restricted in what they can say than are opposition caucuses. (In government caucus, Ministers have access to a great deal of information. Thus, government caucuses are less in need of outside information.)

### **Question and Answer Session**

The question-and-answer session focused on the availability of minutes from committee meetings. A committee clerk from the audience raised the point that committee minutes and transcripts of evidence, while no longer printed by Hansard, are readily available on the Internet. The clerk also made the point that even prior to 1994, minutes and transcripts from committee meetings were never available the next day. Moreover, committee reports are still published.

Mr. Cléroux did not appear satisfied with these points of fact, stating that this is still problematic and that it is no wonder that the press pays so much more attention to Question Period than it does to committees.

Other audience members made the following remarks:

- Not all households have Internet access.
- Many of those who do not have Internet access are very interested in committee hearings.
- Those who are interested in committee meetings but who do not have Internet access could simply phone their Member's office and ask that an Internet print-out of the minutes from the meeting(s) in which they are interested be sent to them.

*Rapporteur: Nick Falvo*

**Workshop no. 1**  
***Issues and Regional Caucus***

**Chair**

**Marlene Cowling**  
**Former Liberal Party**  
**Member of Parliament**

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The Chair for the workshop entitled *Issues and Regional Caucus* was a former Chair of the Government's Manitoba Caucus. Due to the nature of caucus secrecy, many participants looked to the Chair for insight or clarification of assumptions. The focus of discussion was primarily on the Government side because it typically possesses the largest and most diverse number of caucuses. The discussion tended not to conform to the scripted questions; participants choosing instead a more fluid format. Some questions attempted to address the myths surrounding this institution as a forum for debate and policy formulation, while others addressed the sanctity of the rule of secrecy.

According to the Chair, regional caucuses met, as often as was needed. Their schedule would fluctuate depending on the nature and importance of the issues to be discussed. Participants inquired whether caucus is indeed the forum where MPs engaged in a full and frank exchange of ideas. The Chair's viewpoint was that the caucus conforms to that description. Having had an exchange of ideas, regional development strategies or a common voice was formed to bring forward to National Caucus.

A comment was made into the roles that caucuses can play within a government. Firstly, they may be reactive, acting as a quasi-barometer of the electorate. The government gauges the electorate's appeal or dissent to proposals based upon the reaction of caucus members. Secondly, they

may be more pro-active and influential, bringing forward specific recommendations on policy issues. The assessment was deemed to be an accurate reflection of the roles by some, but this assertion was challenged by other participants. Using the *Red Book* to illustrate the point, dissenting participants asked how caucuses could possibly influence a situation where the policy direction was clearly stated in black and white. If they did have influence on policy, it was only within the limited parameters of broad-based themes. In response, it was explained that the initiatives found in the *Red Book* evolved out of consultation with MPs and ideas generated in caucus. In addition, it was generally agreed that the appearance of *Red Book I & II* was an unusual occurrence, but a healthy change for electoral decision-making.

Another participant raised the concern that since each of the parties have become regionalized (Liberals, Ontario; Conservatives, Maritimes; NDP, Maritimes; Bloc, Québec; Reform, West), each national caucus has the potential risk of becoming a "regional caucus". If this is the case, does this not diminish the role of a formal regional caucus? While conceding that this is a valid concern, participants generally felt that this threat had yet to materialize. The Liberals are still pan-Canadian in a reasonable sense. One could also look at vote distribution, rather than actual seats won, for a better reflection of a party's national presence or lack thereof. For some parties, it is less an issue whether they are regressing from national to regional mindset, but rather that they must first develop a national mindset. Building upon that subject, the question was then posed how do regionally based parties develop a national viewpoint when they lack the necessary representation that would help to develop this viewpoint. The answer was simple: parties will include outside sources to supplement their lack of information - it is not just the party that is utilized for policy-making. This issue, referring specifically to lobbyists' access to caucuses, reappeared later in the workshop.

The discussion then turned to the “nuts & bolts” of caucuses, for example, the point at which issues are brought to caucus prior to the introduction of any specific legislation. This led to a review of the hierarchy of the caucus system. Caucus is an opportunity for members to bring forward concerns particular to their constituencies, their region and finally the nation. The issues discussed in a regional caucus typically are of concern to that particular caucus. It is the appropriate forum for their expression. It would be considered bad form to start discussion on a regional issue in National Caucus. The agenda of National Caucus has items listed for discussion, based on a meeting with regional Chairs.

A question then arose as to who sets the agenda in regional caucuses. Is it easily manipulated? In response, it was explained that the agenda is set in consultation with the caucus chair. The distinct hierarchy involved in issue ascension was illustrated as follows. If, for example, an issue particular to the Greater Toronto Area caucus came forward, it would be first debated in that forum, then summarized. The Chair of the Greater Toronto Area Caucus would then carry the issue forward to Ontario caucus. Each sub-regional Chair has five minutes to present issues previously discussed. This leads to a debate by Ontario caucus on the substance brought forward by each sub-region. The process then shifts to National Caucus. The Ontario Chair then brings the issue to the attention of the National Caucus Chair. The reporting from regional Chair to National Chair must be accurate to reduce the chances of dissension and fracturing of consent in its membership. After meeting with each regional Chair (in this instance, the Ontario Caucus Chair), the National Chair transmits this information to the Prime Minister, with whom he meets weekly for the purposes of updating.

Issues that come before regional caucus are twofold. First, Chairs want issues that affect their region. In this instance, the caucus may discuss the strategies for approaching targeted ministers to help resolve the problem or concern. Second, there are presentations to caucus by specific

interest groups, for instance, the Chicken Farmers’ Association. Lobby groups make presentations to targeted caucuses searching for support for their positions. This notion of closed door access by lobbyists caused some concern among participants. It was explained however, that caucus does not engage in a formal discussion until the lobby groups have left following their presentation.

This process raised the possibility of manipulation in the system because interest groups can secure access to caucuses. Due to the fact that MPs are so busy, they cannot verify all statements made in debate of an issue. This leaves them vulnerable to the possibility of collusion between an MP and a special interest group, who work together to push their interest. Special interest briefings to caucus differ from briefings by public service officials who must make an offer of the same briefing available to all opposition party caucuses. It is unclear whether there is any means of public record available to examine who makes presentations to caucuses.

There was some concern about access to caucuses by specific interest groups. Regional caucuses could be an effective way for lobbyists to influence policy. By beginning in a sub-regional caucus, the issue becomes further removed from the sponsoring interest group as it makes its way through the caucus machinery up to National Caucus attention. At that point, it is many times removed (sub-regional, regional, and national) and may lack the stain of interest group activity.

This highlighted the importance of the gatekeeper function in caucus. Who controls access? Who holds the keys? Is the decision arbitrary or based on rational, objective criteria? No satisfactory answer emerged; the gatekeeper function depends on whether it is government or opposition. Sometimes offers to brief caucus were screened out. At other times, due to time constraints, goodwill was assumed on the part of colleagues who have taken up a special interest. As an illustration of the time consumed by caucuses a woman MP from Toronto could be part of, at a minimum, four caucuses: Women’s, Greater

Toronto Area, Ontario and National. The amount of time allotted to caucus activity is considerable for most MPs.

The discussion then turned to the potential differences in power wielded by different caucuses and their comparative effectiveness. Is it the weight of membership that determines the power of a caucus and does this determine the facility of getting issues on the agenda? Offered as an example favouring the sheer numbers argument was the Mulroney government's experience with the Crow Rate debate. Although not directly affecting their interests, the numbers of Quebec MPs made it difficult for the Western MPs to control the direction of this debate.

A participant relayed that he had heard the Ontario caucus is fractious and divided and wondered about the reasons for this. One explanation for the alleged ineffectiveness was that the Ontario caucus has extra layers of caucuses like Greater Toronto Area, Rural, etc. Québec, on the other hand, avoids this multiplicity of diversified interests. There is less divergence in opinion among sitting Québec Members. Also, there are fewer seats in Québec. While one participant suggested it would be feasible to have a GMA (Greater Montréal Area) Caucus, the numbers do not compare to Toronto, where there is easily thirty MPs. The perceived ineffectiveness came down to three elements. Firstly, Ontario's size means that it is central to whatever the original position is; this makes modification or deviation more difficult. Second is the problem of perspective. Essentially, this refers to the phenomenon whereby every region feels they lack weight or clout in decisions. Lastly, it was remarked that the Ontario caucus is known for its high level of party discipline. For the Government to maintain the confidence of the House, it requires the loyalty of its members. Ontario MPs comprise an overwhelming portion of the membership of the Government members, and, as such, require a shorter leash.

A final consideration was the issue of caucus secrecy and media access. On secrecy, it was argued that without the veil of secrecy, many members would be hesitant to voice their honest opinions. The debates would be diluted and reduced to platitudes. Debates in caucus can become passionate and acrimonious. The appearance of this type of display in the lenses of the media could lead to skewed public perceptions. As one participant put it, if the degree of begging and trading were exposed to the public, it would be detrimental to the work done by caucuses. The Parliamentary Press Dinner was used to illustrate the effect that media access can have on politicians' behaviour. The move to make the remarks a matter of public record has reduced the annual roast to a sanitized version of its previous incarnation.

Others argued that the level of secrecy is too stifling and seeps into too many areas. Lament for the idealistic rookie MP, who comes to Ottawa and is gagged by the party's policy line. Conformity of viewpoints was cited as a prime example of the reasons it is sometimes reportedly difficult to recruit worthy candidates. The public does not expect parrots, but expressing individual opinions is not the way to political success in a system of strict party discipline. In fairness, it was conceded that some of this disciplined behaviour could be explained by the negative media publicity that follows any hint of dissension. The Nunziata expulsion continues to haunt the government, most recently with the office allocation procedures coming under fire.

In conclusion, the participants seemed to feel that the balance between caucus secrecy and the public's right to know is tilted the wrong way. If lobbyists are briefing or addressing caucus, then there must be a public record made available. Politics, in many ways, is a game of perceptions. In this instance, the perception is damning. It hints at impropriety and "cozying up" to lobbyists, and therefore should be addressed in such a way as to remove this impression.

Turning to future business, the participants felt that committees should be suggested for future examination. To many, committees have failed to live up to their ideal. They have become one act in an elaborate staged event called Parliamentary Democracy. The shackles of party discipline are secured and the agenda of the government unwavering in the present structure of committees.

*Rapporteur: Scott Rothwell*

## **Workshop no. 2 Caucus and Interest Groups**

### **Chair**

**Cynthia Callard  
Executive Director  
Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada**

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### **Introduction**

The relationship between interest groups and caucus is a source of numerous questions among political scientists and political strategists. Are caucuses an effective means of advancing the issues that interest groups fight for? Which caucuses are most respectful? Do ordinary MPs take advantage of these contacts to weave alliances and increase the weight they carry within their caucuses?

This brief paper is intended to provide an overview of this discussion and suggest a number of topics for discussion. It will first identify the similarities and differences between interest groups and caucuses, and then identify the nature of the relationship between the two.

### **Distinction between interest groups and caucuses**

One point in common between interest groups and caucuses is that they serve to structure the interests they represent and make sure those interests are on the agenda. However, they also differ in several respects.

A caucus is primarily a partisan organization that brings together politicians bound by party discipline. No matter how stormy the discussions in caucus may get, they are transformed into consensus once they move into the public arena. In this sense, it may be said that compromise is a fundamental wheel in the internal workings of the caucus, and that interests never operate

there in their pure sense. It must be added that the caucus is an entity whose lifespan is limited to that of the government in power. An election will have a potentially enormous affect on its make-up, and by extension on its stability.

Unlike a caucus, an interest group is not held together by party discipline. Given that it exists only as long as there is a common interest that unites its members, it is not subject to the “family” dynamic of the caucus, and the loyalty that unites its members is not as coercive. It might also be said that the interests promoted by lobby groups are in this respect “purer” than those that come out of a caucus.

An interest group also differs from a caucus in terms of outputs. The primary goal of its members is to influence the political process, through public opinion, the media, or contacts varying from formal to informal with senior government officials. Its actions therefore do not necessarily lead to the formulation of a policy.

Lastly, it is important to point out that an interest group is not responsible to society in the way that a caucus composed of representatives of the people is. We would repeat that an interest group exists only where there is a common interest that unites its members. It may last for decades or for a few weeks, depending on the nature of the interest in question.

Keeping these factors in mind, we can now consider the relationship between interest groups and caucuses.

### **Relationship between interest groups and caucuses**

The relationship between interest groups and caucuses is constantly changing. The election of a new Parliament, a major event in the news or problems inherent in the functioning of the caucus itself may all, in their own way, result in a redefinition of the interest groups’ strategies and their relationship with the government.

From this standpoint, interest groups would be well advised to study the news, and to get a good understanding of how the machine of government operates. By doing this, they will be able to identify the most useful access channels for advancing their cause. For example, an interest group should know that a new Parliament is generally more open to sectoral demands than is an older Parliament. On the other hand, they need to know that some political parties do not authorize any official meetings between their caucuses and interest groups. In those circumstances, interest groups should learn how to manoeuvre in order to establish informal contacts. Lastly, they will find that the stage at which an issue happens to be will determine how the two parties interact. Often when a bill has been introduced in the House this means that interest groups will do research in partnership with the caucus of a political party, and therefore have a better chance of advancing their cause.

This being said, it is essential to point out that the relationship between interest groups and caucuses is not a one-way street. While caucuses offer interest groups an avenue onto the political scene, they are also an excellent source of information for parties. This is true for both caucuses and government departments, and even for ordinary MPs. (Need we point out that MPs rarely have the human, documentary, financial or logistical resources needed to conduct studies in very specialized areas?) Alliances between interest groups and ordinary MPs enable MPs to exert more pressure within their caucuses.

### **Conclusion**

Generally speaking, three facts emerged from the discussion. First, while interest groups and caucuses are similar in a number of ways, they operate differently and as a result they sometimes form alliances.

Second, it seems that the creation of alliances between interest groups and ordinary MPs is particularly productive, in that each side brings to the alliance complementary strengths that are needed for the other to do its job: getting specific demands onto the agenda, for interest groups, and supplying specialized information, for caucuses or MPs who have insufficient resources.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the relationship between interest groups and caucuses is not static. A number of factors have an impact on the channels available, and it will be to the advantage of interest groups to examine the nature of policy formation carefully and understand it in order to take advantage of situations that will allow them to advance their cause.

*Rapporteur: Isabelle-Sophie Dufour*

## **Workshop no. 3 Caucus and the Media**

### **Chair**

#### **Richard Cl roux Journalist and Member of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery**

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The Chair began the discussion by offering a "How To" list of dealing with the media. First, the media should not be seen as the adversary and should not be approached in an antagonistic way. The Chair argued that reporters can tell when they are not liked and will respond accordingly. Different members of the media have differing levels of integrity, and that must be kept in mind. To this a participant added that the use of the word "media" in the singular gives the impression that it is a monolithic group when, in reality, journalists and reporters are individuals as diverse as the members of any profession.

Second, one must always maintain dignity and integrity when dealing with the media. Any other behaviour will only damage a politician's reputation.

The cardinal rule of media relations is: never, ever lie. If a politician is caught in a lie, it is an automatic story. This type of publicity is never good for anyone's reputation or career.

Next, the Chair reminded the participants that, as fights are won and lost in the public forum, the media is the perfect vehicle for transmitting a political message. The media can help members of the public make up their minds about a given issue by presenting them with all sides of the story.

Fifth, in order to take advantage of this public forum, one must not be handcuffed by fear when dealing with the media. The Chair suggested that instead of being afraid, politicians should look upon reporters as their wildcard. The media is a means for

politicians to speak their minds on an issue before caucus reaches a consensus and announces its position. Mr. Cl roux cautioned that while one must be careful, the media is a way to make one's own ideas known and thereby set oneself apart from the masses.

Sixth, remember that no one controls the media, not even the members of the media themselves. Journalists and reporters will make up their own minds on issues and will not be force-fed any one point of view. The Chair suggested that news is often the result of circumstance; a person's fifteen minutes of fame will come when it will and cannot always be orchestrated. And, one must always remember that even if a reporter can be convinced to tell a story a certain way, it is the editor who has the final say in what gets printed and in what form.

The next rule: never embarrass a political leader. A politician taking a stand, which is contrary to the party line, is often considered newsworthy. However, even more newsworthy is the party leader being caught off-guard because he or she does not know what the members are up to. The Chair argued that a leader would rather be informed and angry than kept in the dark and appear out of touch.

Eighth, when dealing with the media, there is no need to put on a show. Simply say what needs to be said in order to get the message across. Never be phoney. The Chair stated that the public knows when politicians are acting and that any showmanship simply adds to the public's cynicism of elected officials.

Ninth, reporters will never forgive a person who they feel has used them. Honesty is always a better route to take.

Finally, the Chair summed up by reminding the participants that relationships between politicians and the media are balanced and involve give and take. He suggested that while one must always be careful what one says, it is a good idea to get to know reporters and journalists, to build a rapport with the media. The media should be

kept informed and politicians should explain their objectives to reporters. A reporter is more likely to act on a story when he or she is familiar with the issue.

Having established the guidelines, the group turned to discussing the question of whether or not the media have enough information to report reliably about the role of caucuses within the legislative process. The general consensus was that the media does not have adequate access, nor should they. A lack of caucus secrecy would only drive the decision-making process somewhere else, be it to the back room or into the hands of the party elite.

The Chair noted that caucus is becoming increasingly open in that it now wants media attention and advertises its meetings. In the past reporters were chased away from the caucus room. Now they are encouraged to wait for the meeting to adjourn and interview MPs as they exit. By speaking to several Members, reporters are able to learn a fair amount of what went on behind closed doors.

This new reality led to a discussion of the impact of Access to Information legislation on the level of openness within the government and its departments. While one participant argued that less is now recorded in order to prevent documents from being used in an incriminating manner, another argued that the exact opposite is taking place. Instead of writing less, public servants are now writing more so that any real information is lost in a mountain of paperwork.

A participant then asked who is at fault for the media's focus on Question Period as opposed to the real debates which take place in caucus and in committee. Some participants argued that Question Period is nothing more than a show and by only reporting what transpires during this daily 45-minute exchange the media is doing the public a disservice. However, others argued that Question Period is the Opposition's only opportunity to hold the Government accountable for its actions and therefore should receive the most media attention.

Those that supported this point of view felt that the average Canadian holds accountability as more important than policy issues. One participant mentioned that the real, free debate takes place in caucus, a fact that has been acknowledged for well over 40 years. Another added that while real debate may take place in caucus, it is in committee that the real work is accomplished. Finally, another participant suggested that as MPs spend most of their time preparing for Question Period, it is at this time that they are at their best. The group agreed that while this may be true, in reality Question Period only adds to public cynicism toward elected officials.

The group also examined the optimum size of caucus and decided that a membership of twelve is ideal. One participant reminded the group of Parkinson's Second Law: any body larger than 22 will yield power to a smaller group within that body. Examples of this law were discussed, such as the Atlantic Liberal caucus of the 35th Parliament. With a membership of only 31, it was considerably more powerful, effective and able to reach consensus than the Liberal caucus as a whole. The conclusion was reached that caucus is stronger when it is smaller because it tends to be less fractious.

Next, the participants turned to discussing the question of whether or not caucus is the forum for the most serious debate in Parliament. Some said yes, but others believed that what takes place in caucus is simply posturing for the party leader and jockeying for future promotion. It was agreed that the caucus of an opposition party is much more likely to hold real debates than is the caucus of the governing party.

The final conclusion reached by the group was that Question Period, committees and debate in the House of Commons all serve different purposes and should be treated differently by the media. One participant stated that the public expects real debate in Question Period, but another thought that this was not the case at all. Instead, this participant viewed Question Period as a big show. To support this

argument, the example of the Reform Party's changing Question Period strategy was raised. When the Reform Party first arrived in Ottawa, in any real numbers in 1993, its members asked straight, reasonable questions that raised valid concerns without calling into doubt the Government's competence or performance. The Reform Party received little media attention for its

efforts. Realizing that the Canadian public loves to hear their politicians answer tough questions, the Reform Party quickly changed tack and began firing very difficult, media savvy queries. Some would argue that Reform's improved standing in the 1997 election is evidence of just how effective its members were with their new Question Period strategy.

*Rapporteur: Gitane Smith*

**Workshop no. 4  
Caucus and Business Groups**

**Chair**

**David Miller  
Senior Vice-President  
Hill and Knowlton**

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David Miller, the chair of this workshop, who is currently employed as Senior Vice-President of the consulting firm Hill and Knowlton, introduced the workshop by describing his previous experience as an adviser to a number of Liberal ministers, including former Prime Minister John Turner. Both his earlier experience as a mandarin in Ottawa and his present role in the private sector enable him to make an informed judgment concerning the main theme of the workshop.

He began by talking about his perception that private sector firms have never tended to make spontaneous contact with the caucuses of political parties. This real lack of enthusiasm may be explained in part by a widespread belief in the business community that caucuses do not make decisions. *A priori*, companies are more interested in engaging in direct discussion with the people they regard as the real decision-makers, the ministers, without going through an intermediary.

Nonetheless, he considered it a shame that firms refuse to recognize the ability of the caucuses to exert genuine influence on the decision-making process. This failure by the private sector to consider the caucuses is the result of a misunderstanding which originates in the fact that businesses too often neglect to consider the causal relationship that grows up between a caucus and the decisions made that result, for example, in changes to public policy. In fact, it would be more correct to say that the private sector engages in discussions with the caucuses only as a last resort. This will happen once it has exhausted its preferred

methods of action: establishing contacts with ministers or local MPs.

The Chair went on to agree that MPs do not all have the same decision-making power or influence. For instance, from his experience in the government (under earlier Liberal administrations), the influence of the various caucuses of the government party varies, based on geographical factors. He unhesitatingly described the Quebec caucus as being (at least at that time) the most influential, because of the general harmony and unity within that caucus. At the other extreme, he noted to his chagrin that the Ontario caucus at that time (although in his view the situation has not changed much) had a terrible image because it was riddled with schisms. The result was a regional caucus undermined from within and collectively ineffective.

Based on his current assignment in the private sector, he told us that firms would like to see sectoral caucuses created. He cited the hypothetical example of a mining caucus, which might include the departments most involved in this sector of the Canadian economy. This kind of reorganization of the caucuses would enable companies to exert more effective influence in terms of defending and even promoting their interests. The Chair closed his opening address by saying that when the business community tries to influence the caucuses they are more interested in blocking decisions they regard as harmful to their interests than in initiating new legislation.

The discussion began with one participant suggesting that when business groups "dare" to approach caucuses, they do so mainly on issues relating to employment. This person pointed out that the prospect of job creation (or worse, job losses) is always an extremely sensitive subject when it is raised by a company in talking to the members of a caucus.

Another participant went on to advance the idea that the main reason that might prompt firms to approach caucuses is the view that some of their competitors already have easy access to the caucus.

Thus the primary motivation for some business groups is the fear of being outflanked by their competitors.

Another aspect of the question was raised by a participant who asked whether the members of a caucus are by nature more receptive to the business community than to ordinary citizens. She thought that they are; she said that the business communities in some constituencies in Canada can always hold out the prospect of massive job creation to get direct, speedy access to the various caucuses.

A person working as a consultant for construction contractors then referred to the hypothetical mining caucus discussed earlier to voice her desire for a highways caucus to be formed. In her view, a number of departments could be brought into such a caucus, including those responsible for sectors with indirect ties to that industry. Although such a caucus could only be created in stages, the participant hoped that such a coalition might come about, motivated by the hope of creating a feeling of mutual belonging between ministers and businesses.

One participant wondered about how useful the concept of multi-party caucuses was, fearing that this approach might, in the long term, usurp the role of parliamentary committees. He went on to say that this initiative is a phenomenon specific to the American political system and its institutions. The Chair for the most part supported this position, acknowledging that in the United States there is a long tradition of multi-party (or rather two-party) sectoral caucuses. He also acknowledged that this tradition has no roots in Canada, although he pointed out one major exception: the sugar caucus. Nonetheless, apart from that unique case, no other attempt has had any significant result. What is the decisive factor in this failure? While there are many causes, it is basically sufficient to note the extreme rigidity of the Canadian institutional system, which is characterized primarily by party discipline. Many participants seemed to agree that this factor makes any attempt at collaboration among the various political groups in the federal Parliament very difficult. This analysis

seemed to be shared by one participant who cited MPs lack of experience outside of politics as an obstacle to establishing multi-party caucuses. Novice parliamentarians with little experience too often prefer to stick to a very strict interpretation of the sacrosanct party line rather than to innovate. The Chair went on to point out that in his opinion there is an undeniable causal link between the high turnover rate for MPs in the Canadian Parliament and the poor performance of this type of caucus in Canada.

The question of multi-party caucuses prompted other reactions. For instance, one participant said that the primary goal of this sort of caucus is not to develop new legislative measures but rather to formalize priority access to precise information that is much appreciated by firms in fiercely competitive situations.

Returning to the idea that caucuses like this would reduce parliamentary committees' purpose for existence to nil, one participant wondered about the soundness of the approaches potentially identified by a multi-party caucus. Instead, as a valid alternative, he favoured establishing special committees. On this point, the Chair immediately acknowledged that few existing caucuses are encouraged by industry. In fact, one, if not the most important, of the strategies orchestrated by the business sector is to ensure that questions and issues are raised repeatedly within a caucus. The goal is for Cabinet to recognize the central nature of the issue, and consequently to agree to consider the problem.

Bringing the discussion back to a subject in the news, one participant expressed serious concerns about the intensive lobbying campaigns that backbench MPs say are waged against them. This participant, taking what she described as the aggressive campaign by search and rescue helicopter manufacturers as proof of this, asserted that all MPs, both opposition and government, are targeted by rival companies. The Chair stated that, in his view, the more politically sensitive a question, the more aggressive and expensive the lobbying campaigns by the business community will

be. To support his position, he cited another example; the debate surrounding how long pharmaceutical patents will last. In addition, he made a connection between how controversial and political the issue is and the enormous sums of money that continue to be spent by the two opposing camps.

The Chair preferred to redirect the discussion, and invited participants to consider the three questions stated at the beginning of the workshop. On reading the first question, whether business groups have easier access to caucus than other interest groups, several people responded but no unanimous position emerged. This could be seen when one participant argued, citing the range of resources available to actors in the private sector, that because of the self-interested financial motives of those actors, business groups have a clear and unequivocal advantage. Another participant expressed her disagreement, testifying to her prior professional experience with a minister and stressing the fact that many ministers make a point of hearing all types of actors, including consumers. Another participant, who agreed with the last view expressed, put social groups and business groups on the same footing in terms of their power to influence public policy. The debate continued with a participant stating, on the ground that companies alone have the power to create jobs (and ultimately help or hinder MPs in getting re-elected), that it was reasonable, if not necessary, for the business community to be the most influential protagonists in dealing with caucuses.

One participant then raised a general question, disputing the assertion that caucuses really formulate policy. The first answer came from a participant who saw caucuses as primarily a locus of debate. The Chair added that in his view caucuses should not be said to formulate policy. On the contrary, caucuses are generally a good opportunity for disagreements between ministers or regional caucuses to be resolved.

Comparing the nature of the government plenary caucus to opposition caucuses, one participant wondered whether

the business community had easier access to the latter. Another participant then said that the government's situation is different from the priorities established by the opposition parties. Another participant went on to say that the government caucus has a wealth of both qualitative and quantitative resources, including, most importantly, the expertise and know-how of the public service. Opposition parties give their caucuses a very different mandate, to make up for the lack of this kind of administrative support: the caucus becomes a place where priority is given to political strategy. In the chair's view, it is on the opposition side that the need for assistance from business (among others, in terms of information) is most keenly felt. Recalling his past experience associating with decision-makers, he noted that there is one notable exception to this rule, and went on to mention the generalized fear among Canadian businesses of doing anything to assist the Bloc Québécois, even though that party was recognized as the official Opposition to the government for four years. Most businesses, fearing that associating with the Bloc Québécois could seriously damage their relationship with the federal government, redirected their activities into dealing with other political parties.

The second suggested topic, questioning how serious are the debates that take place within caucus, prompted little reaction. One participant spoke, to point out that this question may vary from province to province, while another said that the importance of the caucuses varied according to their actual purpose: in government, the aim is to build consensus, while in opposition, strategic concerns are viewed as the main purpose for the caucus's existence.

The last question addressed how backbench MPs perceive their influence within caucus (for example, in terms of amendments to policies). One participant looked at the question from a historical perspective. In her view, Cabinet members were given priority in the past, while a new trend is emerging at present: MPs, who are now better informed, have an opportunity to play a greater role in the decision-making process. A participant who had in the past

worked with the opposition stressed that while this feeling was growing in the view of the people in the room, a lot of MPs feel powerless.

The discussion closed with one participant noting the practice by which it was possible to invite groups from outside the party to come and present their views to the regional caucuses, something that is now prohibited in the national caucuses. The mere presence of people at the caucuses other than parliamentarians, whether they be experts or assistants, tends to irritate backbench MPs, according to the Chair: it makes the backbenchers feel even more marginalized, an impression that is more widespread on the government side.

*Rapporteur: Dominic Lafleur*

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