
Reflections on the Office of Deputy Speaker

by Hon. Bill Blaikie, MP

In comparison to the Office of Speaker little has been written about the role of Deputy Speaker. In this article Canada's longest serving parliamentarian and current Deputy Speaker reflects upon the different perspective that comes from presiding over debate rather than actively participating in it. He suggests the need for members to find more ways to listen to each other and to work together.



As Dean of the Canadian House of Commons, it fell to me on April 3rd 2006 to conduct the election of a Speaker for the 39th Parliament, something I had done in the 38th Parliament less than 2 years before. In both cases the outcome was the same. Peter Milliken, MP for Kingston and the Islands was re-elected Speaker.

The election of the Speaker in this way, by secret ballot, is a procedure first employed in 1986, when Speaker John Fraser was elected to succeed Speaker John Bosley, who had resigned as Speaker in the middle of the 33rd Parliament. It was a procedure recommended by the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons in 1985, chaired by Jim McGrath MP for St. John's East, and later Lt. Gov. of Newfoundland.

The idea behind the new procedure for selecting a Speaker was to reinforce the notion of the independence of the Speaker from the government, and the independence of Parliament in being able to choose its own Speaker rather than having to accept whoever received

the nod from the Prime Minister. And indeed, not all Speakers since the beginning of this procedure have necessarily been the ones preferred by the government.

In the 38th Parliament, in the context of the first minority Parliament in 25 years, there was further evolution in the nature of the chair with the Deputy Speaker being chosen from the ranks of the Official Opposition. It would remain for the 39th Parliament to create an even more novel situation. Although there is certainly precedent for a non-government MP being Speaker (Speaker Jerome 1979), there is no precedent for both the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker being chosen from the opposition. Yet this is what happened on April 5th, 2006 when I was chosen Deputy Speaker of the House, the first New Democrat to occupy the Chair, and the only MP left in Parliament from the McGrath committee that had pointed the House in the direction of Chair reform.

After 27 years as an active and aggressive partisan MP on the front benches of my Party, being in the Chair was certainly going to be a different experience. As Deputy Speaker I do continue to vote with my Party, and I also continue to attend Caucus meetings and thus am able to maintain my connection with the cause I have given my whole adult life to. This, in my view, would be the worst part of being Speaker, having to be removed from one's political universe. Nevertheless, even as Deputy Speaker, I was in for different take on a place I had come to know well through my various roles as Parliamentary Leader, House Leader, Member of the Board of Internal Economy, and holder of several opposition portfolios over the last eight Parliaments.

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The first and most obvious difference for me was the increase in the amount of time I spend in the House. My weekly roster generally involves anywhere from 10 to 15 hours a week in the Chair, plus, in the case of Deputy Speaker, whatever Question Periods the Speaker may have to miss because of events in the riding, usually on a Friday. This is more sustained and quiet listening than I had become accustomed to in the busy life of an opposition MP running back and forth from one's office to the Chamber, to committee, to other meetings, to the foyer for interviews, or off the Hill to CPAC or CBC Newsworld to participate in political panels.

Not only did my new role require me to stay out of the partisan debate, which I thrived on for years, but it required me to sit politely while some made arguments that previously might have provoked me to seek the floor or at the very least engage in some form of informal exchange. Presently, it just wouldn't do for the Speaker to be heard exclaiming "shame" or for that matter, "hear! hear!" in the middle of some honourable Member's remarks. I have had to practice having an inscrutable countenance.

But listening is a virtue that I was glad to recover, even if I had been forced to do so by circumstance and not by choice. I use the word recover because I think that when I was first elected, I spent more time in the House listening to other MP's than I have in recent years, or, for that matter, than has been the custom for most MP's in recent years. Being in the Chair for so many hours a week has enabled me to listen, to hear all the different narratives that MP's bring with them to the House of Commons; in-

dividual narratives, regional narratives, ideological narratives, and narratives about Canada, what makes it great, what its flaws are, and what the solutions are. Nearly all of the narratives have their own authenticity, and call out to be appreciated, even if they are also to be challenged as not the last word on the matter at hand.

Not all narratives can be reconciled with each other. In part that is why we have elections, to determine the dominant narrative. Yet beyond the occasional defining and self-defining issues I have always felt that there is much more room for common understanding and consensus in Parliament than Canadian political and media culture permits at the moment. I have seen this spirit at work in committees over the years, while during the same time I have seen it almost disappear entirely from Question Period.

As Deputy Speaker I have chaired a number of evening debates in committee of the whole wherein MP's have sought less to be quoted and more to be fruitfully engaged with the Minister. This experience has renewed my conviction that the House would be a better and more productive place if MP's could find a way to disagree less often for its own sake, and work together more often. There will still be plenty of room for profound and thoughtful and even passionate disagreement, but if these differences were to be presented rationally instead of with the now customary overkill, Canadians would be better served.