

At a Disadvantage?

An Analysis of the Orientation for Newly Elected MPPs in Ontario's By-Elections

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An orientation to any new job is a crucial part of learning the ropes. Whether or not this new job is a clerical one or a Member of Provincial Parliament is irrelevant; orientating an individual to any new profession is an essential aspect of their future performance. This paper analyzes how the orientation for MPPs elected in by-elections affects their work at Queen's Park. I argue that MPPs elected in by-elections are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts elected in general elections. Arriving at Queen's Park in the midst of all the action and often lacking in political astuteness, MPPs elected in by-elections are unable to navigate the provincial legislature adequately. Whereas Members elected in general elections undergo comprehensive group training sessions, Members elected in by-elections have less formal guidance upon arriving to Queen's Park and are thrown into the mix haphazardly. This paper uncovers the true orientation (or lack thereof) provided for MPPs elected in by-elections and concludes that it is insufficient.

Introduction

By-elections are a curious case of democracy. Their sheer existence gives us a glimpse into the public's views on the issues of the day, a so-called "mini-referendum." While many are interested in the campaigning of by-elections and their incessant media coverage, a subject few have studied is the socialization of these new members to their role, in the midst of an existing legislative session. A Member gives up their seat at Queen's Park, a by-election is called, and, quicker than you can say "writ," a new Member is sworn in. The process is short, but not always sweet. New members elected in by-elections are faced with the struggle of orienting themselves to a place it can take years to figure out.

While working at Queen's Park for ten months (from September 2009 to June 2010) as part of the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP), a total of four new Members

of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) were sworn-in after having won their respective by-elections. One couldn't help but delve deeper into the topic of by-elections, as they seem to pop up ever so often. As of April 2010, a total of twenty members currently sitting at the Ontario Legislature were elected in by-elections, though two of them were previously elected in general elections (Greg Sorbara and Bob Chiarelli). As there are 107 seats at Queen's Park, nearly one in five members were elected in by-elections; 18.7% of MPPs, to be exact. This is a substantial number and one that should not be overlooked. Considering the vast number of currently sitting Members elected in by-elections, this paper examines the MPPs' experiences upon arriving at Queen's Park. The Legislative Assembly, through the Office of the Clerk, provides a thorough orientation for all new members elected in general elections, but does not do the same when the new member is elected in a by-election. Why is this so? And is it even the responsibility of the legislature to provide such an orientation? Since little to no research has been done on this topic, this paper relies heavily on interviews with MPPs elected in by-elections, conducted from January to April 2010.

Purpose of the Study

As mentioned earlier, new Members elected in general elections participate in an in-depth orientation run through the Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. Their colleagues elected in by-elections do not undergo such formal training; this study was undertaken with the intent of uncovering the discrepancies in orientation upon winning a provincial election, whether it is a by-election or general election.

The training for new MPPs elected in general elections consists of two separate events – a full day orientation seminar, and a half-day procedural orientation. After the most recent general election on October 10, 2007, the orientation seminar was held on November 8, 2007, and the procedural orientation on November 27, 2007. The first day of the first session of the 39th Parliament began on November 28, 2007; all new Members were therefore, in theory, fully prepared for their new roles as MPPs.

To comprehend what Members elected in by-elections miss out on, we must specify exactly what goes on during these two orientation sessions. During the orientation

seminar after general elections, new Members receive a binder stuffed with the contact information of anyone they could ever want to contact, from setting up a BlackBerry to getting a haircut at Queen's Park. Should the Members decide to simply file away the binder with the rest of the paperwork they receive, they will still have sufficiently materials. As you will see, the seminar day makes sufficient use of this binder and all its sections.

In the morning, new members hear sequentially from the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Clerk, the Deputy Clerk, the Executive Director of Administrative Services, the Sergeant-at-Arms (who provides MPPs with his own binder), the Executive Director of the Legislative Library, and the Integrity Commissioner. After these meetings, new members go on an extensive tour of Queen's Park, which includes the Library, Gift Shop, Room 195 (for Swearing-in), Media Studio, Nurse, Hairdressing Services, Security, Cafeteria, and Dining Room. Following a lunch hosted by the Clerk, the new Members hear from returning MPPs – one from each party, where they learn helpful tips from their veteran colleagues. Afterwards is a presentation by members of the Press Gallery, where individuals from Sun Media, the Globe and Mail, CBC Radio, CHCH TV, and the Toronto Star meet with the new Members. The orientation ends with the opportunity for new MPPs to visit two committee rooms. In Committee Room 1 are representatives from Payroll, Finance, Human Resources, and Purchasing. In Committee Room 2 are employees of the Legislative Library, Security and Precinct Properties, Interns, Legislative Information Systems, and Legislative Services. The day ends with a reception (of course), hosted by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario.

The orientation does not end there. A two-hour procedural orientation is available for members closer to the date when the house returns. The following topics are discussed: Election of the Speaker, Throne Speech, Chamber Protocol (a re-enactment), Filing and Notice Requirements, Private Members' Public Business, House Documents, and Standing Orders. Finally, the new MPPs are exposed to "A Day in the House," where they learn about Members' Statements, Reports by Committees, Introduction of Bills, Motions, Statements by the Ministry & Responses, Deferred Votes, Oral Questions, Petitions, and

Orders of the Day.

It would seem obvious to anyone that this two-part orientation is not only in-depth but also critical to the performance of an MPP. The Clerk's Executive Assistant (EA), who has been working at the legislature for fifteen years, has tweaked this two-part training to perfection. The question still remaining is - how do members elected in by-elections function without these orientations? This is where the interviews come into play.

Interview Methodology

All eighteen members elected for the first time in by-elections were contacted with interview requests for this paper. Not all were interested or responsive to my efforts, though the majority was willing to be interviewed. In sum, a total of thirteen MPPs were interviewed. In order of by-election date, they are: Bruce Crozier, David Caplan, Ted McMeekin, Norm Miller, Michael Prue, Andrea Horwath, Bas Balkissoon, Christine Elliott, Peter Tabuns, Cheri DiNovo, Joyce Savoline, Rick Johnson, and Eric Hoskins.

As little research has been done on the topic of socialization and orientation to legislative life after winning a by-election, this paper relies heavily on discussions with Members. All MPPs interviewed were asked if they received any formal orientation after winning their by-election, what the most difficult part of the adjustment was, anything they wish they had known prior to arriving at Queen's Park, who has been the most helpful orienting them to the legislature, what has surprised them most since arriving, if new members have it easier being elected in general elections or by-elections, and if they wished they had received an orientation to Queen's Park while they were still candidates.

Interview Results

Of the Members interviewed, only two confessed to having an orientation – Rick Johnson, the Liberal Member for Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock, and Eric Hoskins, the Liberal Member for St Paul's. Both were elected in 2009. However, both had suggestions on methods to ameliorate this orientation. The remaining Members admitted that they had no orientation upon winning their by-election. Norm Miller, the Progressive Conservative

(PC) Member for Parry Sound-Muskoka elected in 2001, was surprised at how little orientation he received, admitting that he “just assumed that there’d be more formal training” (Miller 2010).

Bas Balkissoon, the Liberal Member for Scarborough-Rouge River elected in 2005, even rhetorically asked “Would an orientation have made it easier? Yes” (Balkissoon 2010). Like many of her colleagues, Cheri DiNovo, elected in 2006 as the New Democratic Member for Parkdale-High Park, also did not have an orientation, nor did she have any sort of political background. And PC Member Christine Elliott, who won her husband’s seat (Jim Flaherty, the Federal Finance Minister) in 2006 in the riding of Whitby-Oshawa, declared that she had no orientation from either her caucus or the Legislative Assembly.

On top of entering in the middle of a legislative session, many of the MPPs interviewed faced additional challenges. Andrea Horwath, the New Democratic Party (NDP) leader and Member for Hamilton Centre elected in 2004, brought official party status to the New Democrats by winning her by-election. This allowed her party to develop an infrastructure that was non-existent prior to her victory. Although her win was undoubtedly helpful to the NDP, the major shifts taking place within the party were all the more disruptive for Horwath. After being elected in 2000 as the Liberal Member for Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale, Ted McMeekin was without an office for six weeks. He floated from one office to another, borrowing space in his colleagues’ offices. Perhaps the Legislative Assembly could have accommodated this neophyte MPP a bit better. After Balkissoon was elected, the party assigned him a staffer to help him adjust to his new role as an MPP, but the staffer’s knowledge of the tasks of a Member was severely lacking. In Balkissoon’s words, “if there was an orientation, probably I would have had a better idea, instead of depending on somebody who I thought had knowledge but it turned out that they didn’t” (Balkissoon 2010). In his case, the party was at fault for failing to provide its newest Member with adequate assistance. Bruce Crozier, the Liberal MPP for Essex elected in 1993, and Michael Prue, the NDP Member for Beaches-East York elected in 2001, both had a question in Question Period on their first day!

When asked about the most difficult adjustment to Queen's Park after winning their by-election, the answers were strikingly similar. Many MPPs stressed the difficulty of learning about what actually goes on at the Legislature, as opposed to activities outside Queen's Park. Hoskins himself said, "The constituency side of being an MPP is the least complicated. The bigger challenge was the Queen's Park component...the Legislative side of being an MPP is probably the area where the most learning has to occur" (Hoskins 2010). Balkissoon similarly stated that the hardest adjustment is finding your way around, and understanding who does what and who to turn to with regards to logistics, such as setting up your office environment. The orientation seminar for new members elected in general elections would undoubtedly have assisted him in this regard. Peter Tabuns, the NDP MPP elected in 2006 to represent Toronto-Danforth also shared the view that the most difficult part of his new job after winning the by-election was "figuring out how things were done in the legislature...the technical matters around moving bills and motions and reports forward, it took a while to catch on" (Tabuns 2010). Though many aspects of any new position are learned on-the-job, the procedural orientation's re-enactment of "A Day in the House" could have assisted Tabuns. DiNovo and Horwath echoed this view, stressing the complicated process of working at the legislature, learning about the rules, procedures, and bills.

While discussing with the MPPs the orientation available to new members elected in general elections, it was shocking to find out how many were either unaware that it even existed, or felt it was unfair they never received such training. The main reason Prue was aware this orientation existed was because he has spoken at it twice. Crozier did not even know there was a formal orientation for new Members after general elections, and Elliott said that being elected in a by-election is a drawback, "because you don't have that general orientation that I think they have for new members elected after a general election" (Elliott 2010). Elliott also faced misconceptions about her knowledge of legislative procedures, as because her husband was an MPP for ten years, people expected her to know more about the rules than she actually did. With regards to Flaherty, Elliott said "I saw him occasionally in Question Period, but I didn't sit in on caucus meetings. I didn't know the rules of the legislature, so I felt as much of neophyte

as anyone else when I first started here” (Elliott 2010). Though she may have had some background on the norms in place at Queen’s Park, she certainly was ill prepared for her position.

Similarly, Balkissoon assumed that he would receive an orientation, but when he did not, guessed that either everybody just sort-of forgot or thought he should simply find his own way around. Miller’s approach was trial and error, “It was just sort of – ask around, and figure out how other people do things, and then try to figure it out on your own without much guidance at all... You do what you think makes sense whether it’s hiring staff or the way you handle things, but I think it would have made sense to have at least some suggestions of ways of doing things or possible ways of doing things” (Miller 2010). We can assume that had Miller undergone an orientation, he would have taken advantage of the suggestions provided by the employees of the Legislative Assembly and more experienced colleagues.

The majority of Members interviewed said other MPPs and partisan staff persons were the most helpful in terms of orienting them to Queen’s Park after winning their by-election. No members actually sought out the Clerk’s office or library staff after being elected, but instead relied on individuals in their party. As they were elected in close succession, Hoskins and Johnson both referred to each other as supportive; Hoskins went so far as to refer to Johnson as “an older brother or big buddy or mentor sitting right beside me who could shovel all this useful information my way” (Hoskins 2010). Miller relied heavily on a staffer who had worked at Queen’s Park for a long time and knew all the rules in the book. He also touched on the importance of help from individual Members, who assisted him with issues that might not even cross one’s mind, such as sending out Christmas cards. Johnson’s staffer was also very thorough, even pointing out where the bathrooms were located. Tabuns drew on the knowledge of his predecessor’s staff.

While Crozier didn’t have a formal “sit-down-at-a-desk” orientation, he relied on an individual in the whip’s office, who even helped him locate an apartment in Toronto. Balkissoon, Prue, Horwath and DiNovo similarly cited their respective whip’s offices

as supportive, and McMeekin mentioned a cabinet minister as one of his teachers. Elliott utilized her husband's experience as an MPP when she had questions, as well as members of her caucus. David Caplan, the Liberal Member elected in 1997 for Don Valley East, also drew on his familial background to political life after winning his by-election, relying on his mother, Hon. Elinor Caplan, a former MPP and MP, as a resource. Many of the members interviewed had been involved in politics prior to running for provincial office, which served as an asset to their future performance. Hoskins worked as a policy advisor to a federal politician, Horwath, Tabuns, and Balkissoon were municipal councillors, Prue and Crozier were mayors, Caplan was a school trustee, and McMeekin worked as an EA to an MPP. Because of this, their knowledge of not only provincial politics but also legislative norms was significant upon winning their by-elections. Prior to being election, Johnson was a musician, Miller a small business owner, DiNovo a United Church Minister, and Elliott a lawyer. During the interviews, it was clear that the members who lacked a background politics suffered, but often, so did those with municipal experience.

When Elliott arrived at Queen's Park, she remembered the bells began ringing, signalling the Members to enter the Chamber. As she had no idea what the bells actually meant, she ignored them, and "completely missed the first round of Private Member's Business" (Elliott 2010). Due to this negative experience, Elliot stressed in her interview the importance of being aware that new Members elected in by-elections don't have a general orientation. Horwath, however, admitted that she was unfamiliar with a great deal of legislative procedure such as standing orders and how a bill moves through the house, even though she had been a councillor. DiNovo admitted that the lack of any kind of structural introduction to the house was the most difficult. Miller recalled that a fellow PC member even gave him an orientation manual that he personally made about how to navigate life at Queen's Park. He also suggested that it would likely be easier to pick up the idiosyncrasies of Queen's Park if one had experience in municipal government. Conceivably, Miller would not have had to rely on a manual from a colleague had he received the formal orientation from the Legislature.

In sum, the issues facing new MPPs elected in by-elections affected them all, regardless of party colour or time of by-election.

Recommendations from the MPPs

When asked about their experiences adapting to life at Queen's Park after winning their by-elections, many Members provided suggestions and remarks for future Members to ease their transition. Hoskins brought up the concept of an Idiots Guide to "Your First day as an MPP," an idea that may seem straightforward but could potentially prevent Members from, for example, missing Private Member's Business. DiNovo stressed the importance of hiring staff that understands the legislative process. Similar to Balkissoon's experience with a staffer lacking any legislative know-how, DiNovo realized the hard way that bringing staff from the campaign to Queen's Park is not necessarily beneficial, as they are often unsuited to legislative work. Members rely on their staff a great deal, so it makes sense to hire employees that are aware of the particulars of working at a legislature.

Johnson suggested developing a CD-ROM video to teach viewers about the job of an MPP. This way, candidates and newly elected Members would have a better and more detailed understanding of an MPP's duties, including the substantial time commitment. Likewise, Crozier said that were he to sit down with a candidate and tell them about life as a Member, he would declare it as "virtually a seven-day-a-week job...you're going to be away from your family a great deal" (Crozier 2010).

Balkissoon wondered why he was not included in the orientation for new members after the general election: "maybe somebody thought since I was here two years I knew everything, well no – it's a big place to learn in two years" (Balkissoon 2010). Horwath also asked if she could participate in the regular orientation after the general election in 2007, but was refused entry. The concept of giving MPPs elected in by-elections the option to participate in the orientation after a general election, even after they have sat as Members, is both a positive and unique proposal.

A final suggestion was one that arguably has the most merit. Elliott suggested creating a buddy system, a proposal many other Members agreed with, to pair up veteran members with the new ones. In her words, the new MPP would “work with another more experienced Member and have someone that you can go to to ask questions that you may feel you should know about and you feel a little bit reluctant to ask, but there might be one consistent person that you can go to” (Elliott 2010). Upon arriving at Queen’s Park, Caplan approached a more senior member of his caucus and asked him to mentor him, as there is no formal twinning system at the Legislature. He said that when by-elections occur, “one of the things that I chat with them [new Members] about is, I share with them my experience – this is what I did and I found it very helpful. I would recommend with you that you find someone who you trust, think you can work with and ask them if they would do that for you as well” (Caplan 2010). Some Members listen to his tip on finding a buddy, others do not. This buddy partnership would be extremely helpful for MPPs elected in a by-election, arriving at Queen’s Park in the middle of a legislative session. The buddy system would undoubtedly benefit both Members, especially the rookie MPP who may have nobody to turn to with seemingly uncomplicated questions.

Conclusions

Though the newest Members interviewed elected to Queen’s Park (Hoskins and Johnson) had orientations, the remaining MPPs admitted to no orientation whatsoever. “Baptism by fire” was the term Horwath used to describe her entrance into provincial legislative life (Horwath 2010). The majority of Members had an additional step to overcome, whether it was being put on the spot for a question on their first day, jumping from office to office, or being assigned a staffer with minimal legislative knowledge. What is most interesting from the perspective of an intern, however, is that the thorough orientation for new Members elected in general elections includes a session on the Ontario Legislative Internship Programme, of which this author is an alumnus. Members elected in by-elections, therefore, are not exposed to the workings of the program, and hence may not be inclined to apply for an intern. Additionally, when the interns arrive at Queen’s Park in September, they undergo several formal training sessions with the

Officers of the Legislature, Clerks, Librarians, and more. Seemingly, the interns are treated better upon arrival to Queen's Park than the new MPPs elected in by-elections!

Overall, the consensus drawn from the interviews with MPPs elected in by-elections is that they are poorly prepared to begin their new role as provincial politicians. Most turned to partisan colleagues, including MPPs, Ministers, the whips office, or political staff. Few were fortunate to have former MPPs in the family, to whom they turned. None utilized staff at the Legislative Assembly to the same degree as, for example, the interns, who often called the library for legislative assistance. The main concern among Members was familiarizing themselves with legislative procedures, including the passage of bills and workings of the House. However, such simple tasks as setting up an office or sending out Christmas cards were also challenges faced by the MPPs.

Though new MPPs elected in by-elections may receive the same binders as their colleagues elected in general elections, it is unlikely they spend as much time perusing the materials. This is probably because the Members elected in general elections go over the content of the binders during their orientation sessions. They are exposed first-hand to the individuals in the contact list. Perhaps the legislature could provide the Members with a video of "a day in the house," displaying a typical day in the legislature. It is different to read about today's business and actually see it. Or, perhaps, if a new Member is elected from September to June, the OLIP interns could provide them with a session on the House, as we are bursting with procedural and practical knowledge.

All of the suggestions proposed by Members were brought forward to the Clerk's office and greeted with genuine interest. The Clerk's EA will also be speaking to the three caucus representatives responsible for training new Members, more clearly defining which aspects of the orientation the legislature and the party absorb. The Clerk's office also plans to incorporate new Members elected in by-elections into the orientation after general elections, if the Members wish. As well, the development of a new department at Carleton brought up by Manning could help ease the transition for neophyte politicians. Perhaps, as is the intent of this study, new Members elected in by-elections will no longer

continue to fall through the cracks, with their caucuses and clerk's offices now well aware of their respective shortfalls.

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