

## HILL LIFE & PEOPLE

# Free overburdened constituency offices from bureaucratic casework, Samara report says

By BEATRICE PAEZ JUL. 25, 2018

Among the proposals for reform is to transform constituency offices into 'civic hubs' — in a permanent spot, and with staff from Service Canada.



A new report argues that MPs' work outside of Ottawa should focus less on managing casework from constituents, and more on consulting them on policy issues. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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Constituency offices should be overhauled to relieve the pressures MPs face in having to tend to casework and to make regular appearances at grin-and-grip events in their riding, says a new report published Wednesday.

In *Beyond the Barbecue*, the latest report in a three-part series (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/06/12/loosen-party-s-grip-backbenchers-says-report/147409>) that looks at the role of rank-and-file MPs, the Samara Centre for Democracy found that former Parliamentarians were increasingly preoccupied with helping constituents navigate bureaucratic hoops while in office, leaving little time for meaningful consultations.

The report, based on exit interviews with 54 former MPs from across the political spectrum—who served during Stephen Harper’s time as prime minister—calls for a “redistributing” of their workload to allow them to be more “effective representatives” in Ottawa.

In contrast to their assignments on the Hill, constituency work is the one area where MPs can, in theory, shape the agenda, according to the report.

“Formally, they have a lot more latitude [at the constituency level],” said Mike Morden, research director at the Samara Centre. “But in practice, case work occupied such a huge share of [resources] out of necessity. Trying to keep up with that demand pulled their attention from anything else.”

Casework often involves helping constituents access public services. Many former MPs found themselves filling the role of Service Canada.

Each MP is given a budget to cover staffing expenses, communication materials, and other costs associated with running the office. The report suggests that many had to allocate much of their resources into their constituency office to respond to demands.

One former MP recounted how staff had to be reassigned to keep up with requests from constituents, which meant prepping for committee work without support: “At one point by the end, I had zero staff in Parliament. ... It was me and the security guards.”

### Setting up ‘civic hubs’ possible solution

In an interview with *The Hill Times*, NDP MP Nathan Cullen (Skeena–Bulkley Valley, B.C.) said it’s not unusual for offices to be “up to [their] eyeballs” managing requests to look into issues around immigration, employment insurance, and pensions. Mr. Cullen said that his constituency offices—he runs three to cover a riding that’s geographically larger than Poland—spend as much as 90 to 95 per cent of their time managing the caseload.



NDP MP Nathan Cullen is running a contest that encourages constituents to come up with a legislative proposal that will be turned into a private member’s bill in the fall. *The Hill Times* file photograph by Andrew Meade

He attributed the increase in casework that offices are expected to handle to cuts made by the Harper government to the public service. While Mr. Morden says that’s a possible factor, he doesn’t think it accounts for the entire phenomenon. Instead, the report cited a number of factors, including expectations on MPs to be more visible in

their riding and the perception that the public needs them to help navigate services.

Among the proposals for reform is to transform constituency offices into “civic hubs”—in a permanent spot that’s located in a high-traffic area, such as near a library or other public spaces. The report also floated the idea of housing Service Canada staff in the hub so constituents would

be better served and wouldn't have to rely as much on MPs and their staff.

### Less emphasis on event attendance, more on consultation

In addition to spending a majority of resources on casework, MPs reported feeling pressured to accept invitations from constituents to barbecues, cultural festivals, and fundraisers. The report quoted a former MP who recalled having to report appearances at certain events to the Prime Minister's Office: "[The PMO] tracked whether or not you were going and how many [events] you went to. ... I never thought it was a good use of time."

As much as events can help build an MP's profile in the community, the report noted that many recognized they're not equivalent to time spent consulting on hot-button policy issues. Many MPs were also at a loss for ideas on effective ways of engaging constituents. "They need some support. We suggested developing some tools that would be available to MPs so that they can take the initiative to a certain extent," Mr. Morden said.

Mr. Cullen's effort to engage his constituents through a contest calling on them to submit ideas for a private member's bill was cited in Samara's report as an example of how MPs can reimagine the work constituency offices take on. The contest was initially developed to open up the legislative process to high school kids, the NDP's critic for democratic reform said: "This was a way to make sure I was matching up words with actions—oftentimes, politicians say we want to hear more from young people. We care about what young people say, but we don't really do much about it."

This year, the contest has been expanded to people of all ages across his riding; the deadline is approaching at the end of the month. The author of the winning legislative proposal will be flown to Ottawa this fall, with the costs coming out of Mr. Cullen's pocket. He hopes other MPs will adopt the idea in their riding.

Despite public cynicism about politicians, another recent study suggested that many Canadians still have faith in their institutions and the legislative process. In a 2017 report on electoral reform, Vox Pop Labs suggested that 55 per cent of Canadians would prefer MPs spend more time on the Hill than on the ground in their riding."It suggests there's still a general sense that Ottawa work matters," Mr. Morden said. "You hear [this] a lot in interviews: 'You need to get out of the Ottawa bubble, got to go back to the community.' When you ask Canadians, they still seem to maintain a sense that there's some useful stuff that can be accomplished within the Ottawa bubble.