

Winnipeg Free Press

Opinion

MP representation is a complex task

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Posted: 09/7/2018 4:00 AM



Nathan Denette / The Canadian Press (FILE)

For politicians, the demands of “the barbecue circuit” can become overwhelming.

What does it mean for Canadian Members of Parliament to be good representatives? Maybe it means that MPs should studiously learn about the policy views of their constituents and then do whatever they can to advance those views in Ottawa. Or

maybe it means that MPs and the staff in their constituency offices help people deal with all sorts of problems, from immigration-related issues to difficulties dealing with the civil service.

Maybe being a good representative includes a little of both roles.

The Samara Centre for Democracy, a Toronto-based think-tank concerned with improving the conduct of Canadian democracy, has a new report out that explores these questions. It finds that casework and helping constituents with problems are becoming bigger and bigger aspects of MPs' jobs, and are occupying increasingly more of their time.

MPs also appear to be spending more time in their ridings, and feel obliged to attend greater numbers of events to press the flesh with their constituents. The report, ***Beyond the Barbeque Circuit: Reimagining constituency work for local democratic engagement***, is available online and well worth reading.

You might think MPs helping constituents and making greater efforts to keep in contact with them sounds great. But Samara's analysts take a decidedly dimmer view of these trends. Constituency work, they argue, can quickly become a crushing load for MPs. And attending event after event on weekends and parliamentary breaks — the barbeque circuit — can quickly become overwhelming. Both these trends make it difficult for MPs to represent their constituents' wishes in Ottawa.

At the same time, MPs worry their efforts to learn about what's on their constituents' minds are not passing muster. MPs often hold town halls or informal meetings with constituents to learn about their policy concerns, and then do what they can do act on those concerns. But MPs are often not sure if what they hear at such events is a reliable indicator of what their constituents are actually thinking.

Instead, MPs may only be hearing from a particular subset of their constituents who have time on their hands and are willing to attend such events to sound off. One MP, for example, complained about "guys at mics": at every event, no matter where in the constituency it was held, the same guys would show up and give their opinions.

Samara makes several recommendations to address these problems. Notably, MPs should engage in more sophisticated methods of learning about the policy concerns of their constituents. Further, the report recommends constituency offices be placed in the

same locations as Service Canada centres to better coordinate casework concerns and requests.

I have a slightly different view of these matters. I just released a book (with Heather Bastedo and Kelly Blidook), *Representation in Action: Canadian MPs in the Constituencies*, which looks precisely at how MPs act as representatives of their constituents. My co-authors and I followed MPs around as they spent time in their constituencies, to learn about how they actually go about doing their jobs as representatives.

What we found (among other things) is that there is no single way of being a good representative in Canada. MPs define the job in different ways, do different things, and judge themselves using different criteria. There is no guidebook for new MPs, no instruction manual. Instead, MPs draw on past experiences and observations to tailor a unique representational style that pleases them and (they hope) pleases their constituents, thereby helping them in future re-election campaigns.

Some MPs do focus a great deal on acting as service representatives, learning about constituents' problems and doing everything possible to help them. But others are much more interested in the policy concerns of constituents, both learning about and acting on them. Still others engage in building connections with their constituents by attending local events and making sure they are visible, accessible and relatable. The ways MPs strive to achieve these goals can differ greatly. Some MPs focus on one task, while others take a broader approach.

You can't understand representation in Canada without understanding how diverse it is in practice. Samara's recommendations may improve some aspects of MPs' jobs, but we should recognize that the role of representative is largely up to the MPs themselves, and diversity in how they approach the job is therefore inevitable.

This is something to keep in mind in the next election, when you are looking at both the candidate and the party name on the ballot. Your MP will align with their party and rarely deviate. But the nuances of the representative you're getting have less to do with the party and more to do with who the candidate is. You're voting for a candidate, not a party.

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