



The art of the statement: Assessing the purpose of members' statements in the 41st Legislative Assembly of Ontario



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Abstract

To most people outside the walls of a Canadian legislature, members' statements are entirely unknown. But these 15 minutes per day at Queen's Park can provide valuable insight into the functioning of the Assembly, the relationships between and within political parties, and the roles individual Members of Provincial Parliament perceive themselves to have. This paper will seek to explore how members' statements are used in the 41st Legislative Assembly of Ontario. All statements in Hansard from July 2014 to April 2016 were reviewed and classified by the primary function of each statement. While the majority of the statements meet what members believe is their function, to highlight their constituencies, this is not their only use; there is a phenomenon of MPPs using the statements as a partisan tool, which is consistent with the Parliament of Canada and is worthy of further study. Members' statements, while routine, are still not well-defined in their function even thirty years after their introduction in Ontario politics.

Context

Members' statements take place as part of routine proceedings every sitting day of the legislature, and are allotted 15 minutes. As prescribed by S.O. 31, each statement is a maximum of one and a half minutes. The number of statements per party depends on the allotment of seats in the Assembly.

While the rules on standing orders haven't changed since their introduction, there is public discussion about the evolving role of members' statements in various legislatures. Several incidents have made the news in recent years that have brought this otherwise overlooked part of parliamentary procedure to the fore.

Methodology

All statements in Hansard from July 2014 to April 2016 were reviewed and classified by the primary function of each statement, whether community-focused, outwardly-focused, advocacy-based, or principally partisan or political in nature. The members' statements were sorted into the classifications listed at right.

Community-focused

Any statement targeted at all of or part of a community part of the member's riding

- Community events or initiatives
- Constituent
- Honours/awards
- Local issue
- Ethnic/cultural
- Industry

Outward-focused

Topics addressing a broader audience than just a member's riding

- Social issues
- Current events
- History

Campaigns and advocacy

Issues concerning a broader audience, and usually tied to a day, week, or month of significance

Partisan/political

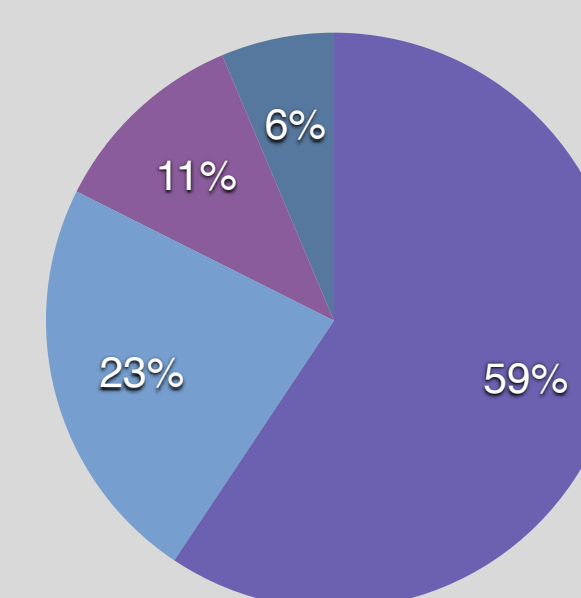
Statements for which the key characteristic is partisanship or heightened political discourse

- Positive partisan
- Negative partisan
- Policy; neither positive nor negative

Results

In the 41st legislative assembly, a total of 1449 members statements were made. Of these, the majority, addressed topics relating to members' individual communities. Within this category, the emphasis was on community events and initiatives. Political and partisan statements made up a substantial portion of the remaining statements, while there was a surprisingly small number of statements that were outwardly-focused.

Members' statements in the 41st Assembly



Breakdown of members' statements

	Number	Percentage
Community-focused	860	59%
Outward-looking	92	6%
Campaign/advocacy	163	11%
Partisan/political	334	23%
TOTAL	1449	100%

Conclusions

MPPs seem to believe that the only role of members' statements is to highlight happenings in their constituencies, but this assessment shows that this is not the only way they are used. In the words of Ontario Legislative Assembly Speaker Dave Levac, "it's evolved beyond what people would normally do, and that is to brag about their riding."

This study does not, however, show levels of partisanship or caucus discipline that have been observed at the Parliament of Canada, in particular prior to the October 2015 election.

This study can be expanded on both quantitatively and qualitatively. A comparison of different legislatures may be valuable to an assessment of the use of members' statements by providing context. Ontario is currently in a majority government situation, which no doubt affects levels of partisanship; staff and members report a climate of heightened partisanship in the 40th Legislative Assembly prior to the June 2014 election, due to it being a minority assembly.

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