

**Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns:  
Exploring the Relationship between the Constituency Office, the Backbench MPP  
and the Bureaucracy**

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## INTRODUCTION

For years, academics have produced a plethora of research on the Member of Parliament in an effort to explain the role and function of this political actor, and/or analyze his/her behavior. David Pond states that the role of the backbench MPP is ‘to faithfully espouse their parties’ policies in the Legislature and on the hustings; [to be] ombudsmen for their constituents; and to familiarize themselves with the details of complex areas of policy.’<sup>1</sup> In regards to analyzing the Member’s behaviour, scholars like Graham White have applied a rational-choice model to explain that political actors are motivated by self-interest, altruism or some combination of both.<sup>2</sup> It is maintained that the self-interest side is manifested in the Member’s blatant efforts to increase his/her legislative roles and responsibilities and/or further the position of his/her party platform, whereas the Member’s genuine desire to serve his/her community is indicative of more altruistic tendencies. Despite the extensive literature that defines and describes the role of the Member and provides in-depth analyses of the behaviour of the Member, I have endeavoured to discern each Member’s personal perception of the role of the Member of Provincial Parliament, and allow each Member to explain the intentions and effectiveness of his/her own behaviour.

During my observations and interactions with the MPPs, I was acutely aware of how much – or how little – the backbench MPP believed he/she could affect policy, and how much more time was concentrated on the Member’s constituency work. Ergo, I will attempt to show how much more value is placed on the role of the Member of Provincial Parliament as an ombudsman for his/her constituents, or as Anthony Birch states, ‘an agent of local concerns.’<sup>3</sup> I spent a formidable amount of time in the constituency office during my first placement, and coupled with my interest in the MPP as an agent of local concerns, I became more intrigued by the complex web of interaction between the players of each institution.

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<sup>1</sup> David Pond, “The Role of the Backbencher – Current Issue Paper 103,” Legislative Research Services, Ontario Legislative Library, July 1995, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Graham White, *The Ontario Legislature – A Political Analysis*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Birch, *Representative and Responsible Government*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

This paper examines the role of the backbench MPP as an agent of local concerns, and provides a detailed exploration of the relationships between the constituency office, the backbench MPP and the bureaucracy, ie. Ontario ministries and government agencies. I will discuss the meaning of the MPP as an agent of local concerns, and how it relates to the MPP's perception of his/her primary duty. I will then delve into a detailed analysis of the relationship between the MPP, the constituency office and the bureaucracy, using the data collected from thirteen semi-standard elite interviews. I will identify a number of reoccurring themes from these interviews and discuss each one in an effort to address my main questions: What is the role of the MPP from the perception of the Members of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario? What factors facilitate, impede or completely preclude the fulfillment of this duty? How can the interaction between political actors, bureaucrats and constituency workers be ameliorated?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

I conducted ten semi-standard elite interviews with the following Members of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario (Refer to Appendix 1):

Member 1: Liberal, long-serving ( $\geq 10$  years), Urban riding, Parliamentary Assistant

Member 2: NDP, short-serving ( $< 10$  years), Urban riding, Critic

M3: Liberal, long-serving, Rural riding, Parliamentary Assistant

M4: Conservative, short-serving, Rural riding, Critic

M5: Conservative, long-serving, Urban riding, Critic

M6: Liberal, short-serving, Rural riding, Parliamentary Assistant

M7: Conservative, long-serving, Rural riding, Critic

M8: Liberal, short-serving, Urban riding, Parliamentary Assistant

M9: Liberal, short-serving, Rural riding

M10: Conservative, short-serving, Rural riding, Critic

I also conducted two phone interviews and one face-to-face interview with constituency staffers (Constit) from the offices of M2, M3 and M10:

Constit 2: NDP constituency staffer

Constit 3: Liberal constituency staffer

Constit 10: Conservative constituency staffer

### **The Interview Process**

Upon receiving each Member's consent to participate, a schedule of twelve open-ended questions was forwarded to the Members' offices (Refer to Appendix 1). Before each session, the Member was briefed about the purpose of the paper and guaranteed anonymity upon participating in the interview process. During the interviews, I found probing to be a highly effective means of ascertaining more information from the Member, however for the most part, the respondents were extremely candid and forthcoming with information. All interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed on place, ranging from the Member's office, to the Legislative cafeteria. For two of the interviews, a third party was present, however I do not believe that this had a substantial effect on the quality of the responses I received. No research bargains were necessary, and none of the participants requested to be withdrawn from the study.

After each interview, the process of content analysis began by codifying each participant's responses using my hand-written notes from the interview as well as the tape recording. As this open coding process progressed, it was imperative to continuously reanalyse the data. More patterns and themes emerged as I studied the responses of the interviewees, and these were used to determine the role of MPP from the perception of the Member; to identify and explore the primary duty of the backbench MPP and to discuss the relations between the backbench MPP, the constituency office and the bureaucracy.

## **THE ROLE OF THE BACKBENCH MPP – A MEMBER’S PERSPECTIVE**

The first question I asked my interviewees was: “What do you believe is the role of the Member of Provincial Parliament?” Recall that Pond provided a three-part description of the role of the MPP: to support the party platform; to be ombudsmen for constituents and to become familiar with complex policy areas. Of the ten MPPs interviewed, eight MPPs mentioned only the last two points of the three-part description of the role of the MPP espoused by Pond.

M1: *It is obviously to represent people in the riding in terms of listening and providing views; to participate in the legislature in terms of proposing, discussing, endorsing or defeating legislation; supporting good initiatives in a community that help make better communities.*

M2: *Two roles - one is to make the laws and the other is to act as an advocate on behalf of one’s constituents. That entails a lot of constituency work, trying to be an ombudsman, trying to make your way through the bureaucracy. Also, I go to a lot of meetings and let people know that the government is accessible and to get their feedback.*

Member 3 and Member 4 focused solely on their role as an advocate for local concerns.

It was duly noted that both MPPs represent rural constituencies, and during their interviews they spoke about the extra effort they exert in reaching out to the constituents within their expansive ridings.

M3: *The role of the Member of Provincial Parliament is to represent the constituent at Queen’s Park; he must be aware of the needs. And also to meet with groups and individuals in order to let them know what services are available. There are many differences between rural vs. urban ridings. In a rural riding, the Member has to deal with many different municipalities, whereas in urban areas, personnel are in place so there is not so much reliance on the MPP. Rural members have more needs to address because of scarce municipal representation.*

When asked if the Member considered him/herself to be ‘constituency-oriented’

Member3 replied:

*Definitely. I have to drive no less than 600km to visit between constituency offices. When OMPF was announced, I had to travel to different parts of my constituency to explain. I have done many major announcements as a result of new government policy. I must deliver the message to explain the issue.*

Member3 continued talking about the importance of educating constituents, and the

Member spoke fondly of the opportunities he/she has had to make drop-in visits to homes, especially with seniors. The MPP believed that this type of constituency work is a “good way to get to know people and find out what the people are concerned about.” The Member also mentioned that the constituency work entails returning an average of 400 calls per day between the three constituents represented in his/her respective riding.

Member 4 also has had a similar experience as a rural, constituency-oriented Member:

*The role of the MPP is to bring forth the concerns and represent the riding; bring forth changes in the laws that affect the riding. You're like a catalyst; you're looking at the issue and thinking ok, how can we change this for persons in Ontario though particularly for people in your riding.*

*(Would you describe yourself as 'constituency-oriented'?)*

*Very much so. I really truly love my constituency, and any opportunity I can go to events and interact with people. I learn through that process. People are very patient in teaching you what their specific issues are and their expertise and what needs to be changed. It's the people of the riding that add strength. That's the best part of my job: thanking the people that volunteer their time. Over time, hopefully as things change, I won't have that luxury but now I'm enjoying the learning process.*

Recall that not only does this Member represent a rural riding, but he/she has also served in office for a very short period of time ie. less than four years. I expected him/her to fit the mold of the new constituency-oriented representative who has embraced the role as agent for his/her constituents. Another rural Conservative fairly short-term (less than 7 years) Member stated that the role of the MPP is, “*To legislate, to look after the finances of the province and look after constituency concerns.*” In response to the next question, “Would you describe yourself as constituency-oriented?” the Member responded:

*Yes, absolutely in terms of getting re-elected it's very important to look after the constituency concerns and to look after the issues in the riding. As simple as showing up at a lot of different events they want you to show up at, in addition to looking out for various constituency concerns. I think it's very different between a rural riding and an urban riding. I remember hearing that Chris Stockwell from Etobicoke, he hardly step foot in the riding or hadn't come to any events at all. You have the local politicians that take a more significant role in Toronto. And also if you're from a small rural riding, you may not have a hospital in your riding, you may have limited schools, some don't even have roads, and the roads may not be looked after by the local governments. In [my riding], we have three significant hospitals and many many different schools, we have significant highways – provincial highways – we have other concerns that are provincial...in [my riding], which is rural, it is very much expected that the MPP will show up at*

*various events – it will be noted if you don't show up. I do feel very constituency oriented.*

Likewise, when I asked Member 9 - another fairly short-term, Member of the Liberal party – for his/her opinion on the role of the MPP, the Member responded:

*The role of the MPP is to effectively represent your community; to bring the dreams, aspirations, interests and concerns of my constituency to Queen's Park and to not have Queen's Park dictate the interests of your community.*

No mention was made of the importance of the role of '[espousing his/her] parties' policies in the Legislature and on the hustings,' nor was any mention made of the importance of '[familiarizing him/herself] with the details of complex areas of policy.' Admittedly, I am certain that this Member would agree that the other 2 roles that Pond believes an MPP should play are also very important, however, what was presented as priority – or as the primary duty – was the role of the MPP as an agent of local concerns.

Member 8 had a rather interesting response when asked: "What do you believe is the role of the Member of Provincial Parliament?" Member 8 – a Liberal short-term (less than four years) parliamentary assistant who represents a rural riding replied:

*First role is to serve your constituents and that alone is a full time job. Then I'm also a Parliamentary Assistant to [a Ministry] so I have a lot more to do with the Ministry staff. Also sit on a number of committees, so you have a lot of contact with different Ministries depending on the committees you're sitting on.*

The Member identified her primary duty as that of the representative of local concerns, however she balanced her answer by alluding to the importance of policy when she mentioned her PA portfolio, her committee work and her interaction with the Ministry. Nonetheless, the Member goes on to explain why constituency work remains her highest priority:

*My focus is my constituency and it's a real balancing act particularly when you're dealing with another project and you have to keep your handle on home and what's going on at home. But my main focus at home is customer service, client service. My staff, we do what we can to help and we try to direct them in the right direction if we can, but I try and go the extra mile and not just send them off to somebody else but actually try and get them a name or try and get in touch with that person ourselves. We try to provide as much information as we can so they don't feel like they're getting the run around...I also look at when I'm doing things here on a policy basis and when I'm working on my committee, I always*



*look at how it effects my people at home. Coming from Northern Ontario, I have a certain perspective as well, so I tend to bring that to the table when I can as well.*

Similarly, Member 5 – a Conservative, long-serving Member with a number of Ministerial portfolios and an extensive collection of parliamentary roles from past years – talked about the importance of constituency work, yet he tempered it by enumerating other important facets that make up the role of the MPP. When asked to explain the role of the MPP, Member 5 replied:

*To represent your constituent at Queen's Park and to advocate for their priorities; secondly to make reasonable decisions in questions or other issues in the Legislature to reflect the views of your constituents as well as your own; and to ensure that the province continues to grow and prosper. I rank the constituency role above the role of the province.*

Member 5 went on to explain why constituency work is the primary duty of the MPP, and he tidied off his assertions with:

*The greatest reward is that when you can look back on a community and see the development of something you've had the impact on. I find that to be more rewarding than anything that I may have done as a Cabinet Minister.*

Essentially, there are a number of variables that can affect the Member's perception of his/her primary duty: whether he/she represents an urban or rural riding, the number of years he/she has been in office, the extent of parliamentary roles the Member has had/currently has, his/her political ambitions and/or experiences. Based on my sample, all the Members interviewed recognize the importance of representing their constituents, and the majority of my respondents have readily identified it as their primary duty, ie. they perceive themselves as agents of local concerns.

Having identified the primary duty of the MPP based on my sample of MPPs, I will address the following question: What factors facilitate, impede or completely preclude the fulfillment of this duty?

In order to fully appreciate the dynamics involved in the MPP fulfilling his/her primary duty as an agent of local concern, one must explore the different modes of interaction that

occur between the players involved in the process. Interactions between the MPP, the bureaucracy, MPP liaisons, and Ministers take place, and at best, local concerns will be effectively raised and efficiently addressed. At worst, ‘actor constellations’ may emerge with the potential of getting in the way of the MPP achieving his/her primary duty.<sup>4</sup> Based on game theory, certain interactions between the players involved will produce different constellations ranging from pure coordination to pure conflict.<sup>5</sup> Most of the constellations I will present in this paper – as described by the MPPs in the interview process – fall into the ‘mixed –motive games category...in which the preference of the players are partly harmonious and partly in conflict.’<sup>6</sup> I have identified the following five modes of interaction:

- MPP and Bureaucracy
- MPP and Minister
- Constituency Office and Bureaucracy
- MPP & Constituency Office and MPP Liaison
- Minister and Bureaucracy

As I describe each mode of interaction, I will also discuss a few themes/reoccurring issues that facilitate the MPP in achieving his/her primary duty, hinder his/her efforts, or completely preclude his/her chances of fulfilling his/her role as an agent of local concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> Fritz Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play*, Boulder: Westview, 1997, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

## MODES OF INTERACTION

### MPP and Bureaucracy

As an agent of local concerns for his/her riding, sometimes an MPP will contact the bureaucracy him/herself in order to have a particular issue raised and addressed. In response to my question: “Which re-occurring issue(s) is/are of particular concern?” all of the MPPs were able to identify a number of problematic issues that affect their ridings on a continual basis. The most common issues included the backlog of birth certificates/slow service at the Registrar General’s Office and problems with the Family Responsibility Office. Seven of the ten MPPs had at least something negative to say about the service delivered by the bureaucracy. The four Opposition Members provided the most interesting fodder. Member 2, fairly short-serving (< 7 years) NDP stated:

*If you’re talking about bureaucracy in terms of the Minister’s office, they are abysmal (Laughs). They are awful beyond belief(Laughs again). The ordinary bureaucrat at the medium to low level is more than happy to talk, to help, and to get involved with individual stuff. But the one’s around the Minister’s office are secretive; they are most unhelpful, especially out of Bountrogianni and Papatello’s office.*

Member 7, a long-term well-seasoned Conservative emphatically stated:

*You don’t have – at least I don’t have – a lot of direct contact with the bureaucracy. I will from time to time talk to deputy ministers about the issues, but this government seems to have centralized communications so that if I call a Director or above, I usually get the Minister’s office calling me back, which I find insulting. It’s never happened before. They sent out a memo a year and a half ago to say that all inquiries from MPPs will go through the Minister’s office, so the first time I ran into that insult, I raised it in Hansard two or three times including last week about Highway 26. I’ve been working at this place for 21 years and I know these people, I know their families and their kids, and they say oh, you have to go through Minister Tackhar’s office. I find that you’re writing a paper at the right time. It’s horrible. When you have to go through the Minister’s office, first of all you get the political filter; it’s a double-edged sword in one sense.*

Member 5, another long-serving Conservative veteran said:

*In the Legislature, it’s been brought up, the taping of meetings. [Member 7] has brought it up. You should talk to him; he’s been here a lot longer than I have. He’ll be able to share with you how regional civil servants were told not to talk to*

*him. This is very very ominous; can be very dangerous. What should be an open and transparent relationship with the civil service depends on that. If there was a contact with my office from an MPP when I was Minister, it's customary for civil servant to let the Minister know, because the Minister may be asked this in question period and they would have to respond. But now, it's something very different to tell the civil servants that they can't talk to the politicians... I spoke a bit about this in the House; I got a point of privilege and I talked a bit about the relationship between the civil service and the Opposition and how we act as advocates for our constituents who would have trouble advocating for themselves with the civil service and how the tapping or muzzling of the civil service affects our role.*

Member 5 brought up a very interesting theme: The Silencing of the Bureaucracy. This issue can be extremely frustrating for the MPP if he/she is to fulfill his/her primary duty as an agent of local concerns for his/her constituents. Member 10, a fairly short-term Conservative also commented on this problem:

*This government in some cases has told the bureaucracy not to deal with the MPPs and has told them to tell MPPs to call the political staff. That is not helpful at all because political staff are generally useless, or at least you very seldom get anything accomplished. So where they limit your access, it does negatively affect, and I've seen that when in government and in Opposition. When they do that, we can raise that in the Legislature and make a big deal about it, question why they're limiting it.*

Even Member 9, a well-respected Liberal spoke about this issue:

*Previously, I've felt sympathetic to bureaucracy staff over the years, particularly in terms of when they say, 'I'm sorry, this is what I was told to do.' The staff seems to be intimidated and I would directly say this has to do with the style of leadership. When you say, 'If you talk, you're fired,' you create two monsters: Fear – because they can get fired; and Sabotage – because you get the brown envelopes and that's not how government should work.*

When the bureaucracy is silenced, this creates a 'deadlock.' The supposed common interest of the Member and the bureaucracy to serve the public seems idealistic, and neither of the players involved are effective in fulfilling their purpose. Relations between the MPP and the bureaucracy become even more strained, and the biggest loser is the constituent. However, I would be remiss to not include at least one satisfactory comment made by Member 4, a short-serving Conservative Critic:

*[The bureaucracy] will give you an ear as an MPP... Ministry has been realistic with me, and I appreciate that honesty because I haven't been here for a long time. I know some members have said they've been shut down from information, but I haven't had that problem. There's a lot of work and follow-up involved in getting information. Because I'm a new member, a lot of times I just want to know how some things work, and [the bureaucracy] had been good in that respect.*

Again, there are a number of factors that mediate the type of relationship that will exist between the bureaucracy and the MPP: the temperament of both parties involved; the existence or non-existence of long-term correspondence/communication between the two sets of actors; the breath of experience each party has in dealing with the issue at hand; and how well each actor understands the role, intentions and limitations of the other. The effects of these variables on the MPP performing his/her duty as an agent of local concern are even more evident when considering the relationship between the constituency office and the bureaucracy. The constituency office work is instrumental in helping the MPP to achieve his/her primary duty, and it is at this time, I will turn my attention to a description of the dialectic exchange between the constituency office and the bureaucracy and show how the level of conflict/coordination that occurs, either impedes or helps the MPP in acting as an agent of local concerns.

### **Bureaucracy and Constituency Office**

In answering my question: "How effective do you think constituency work is in affecting the operations of the bureaucracy, Member 2, NDP short-term Critic said:

*People come to the constituency office when they have a problem. We are the grease!*

Compared to the MPP, the constituency office staff has much more contact with the bureaucracy; essentially it is the constituency staff that spends every working moment dealing with the local concerns of the Member's riding to the bureaucracy, ie. Ministry and government agencies. However the interaction between the bureaucracy and constituency staffers is far from perfect, and in many instances the 'prisoner's dilemma' is played out between these two sets of actors. In a perfect world, both the bureaucracy and the constituency office should work together to advance the public interest. However, if both parties work independent of each other, these '[individual] rational choices will

produce collectively irrational outcomes.’<sup>7</sup> Essentially, communication is necessary in order to secure agreement on the ‘cooperative solution.’ In the case of the bureaucracy-constituency office interaction, the cooperative solution is related to ensuring that the local concerns of the Member’s riding are efficiently addressed. The complexity of the interaction between these two parties is enunciated by Liberal Parliamentary Assistant short-term serving Member 6 and my respondents from the three constituency offices I contacted (after receiving permission from the respective Member). From these interviews, a number of themes emerged including the importance of communication; the importance of building solid positive relations; and the need to work together.

I asked Conservative staffer Constit 10, “How would you rate the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to the constituency concerns of your office?” In her response she touched on the importance of communication and the need to establish strong relations:

*Overall, bureaucracy is responsive. I would give about a 7. They tend to get back at you because we have contacts. They will answer my questions. Some are excellent, particularly with OHIP cards, as long as the bureaucracy has the consent forms from the constituents and other necessary documentation. I’ve developed excellent relations.*

Liberal Member 6 spoke extensively about the importance building solid relations and facilitating open communication between the constituency office and the bureaucracy:

*For main line programs like FRO or ODSP, our staff has a relationship with the local staff person. I know for FRO, my constituency person calls on Wednesday afternoons at 3:00. They have an understanding; they’ve developed a relationship with someone at FRO and he will prepare through the week for that phone call. So knowing this, he will take the information from various people with those kinds of concerns - or if there’s follow-up from a few weeks ago - and he knows that at 3:00 he has his list and he goes through all the questions and in the process he gets all his inquiries in, so that next week, he calls back again. They have that relationship now, and it seems to be working well for the office and the client.*

Liberal staffer Constit 3 also spoke about communication. On realizing the need to work together to achieve a common goal – addressing the concerns of the constituents – she offered her own suggestion on how this communication could be improved by building better relations between the two parties:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 75

*Overall, the communication is very good. The only suggestion I would make is to have assigned people in government agencies to each constituency office as done with FRO and WSIB. Overall communication is very good, but I would suggest assigning a contact person for different MPP offices in problematic departments due to changes or low staff levels. We need these designated contact people for Members' offices.*

However Constit2 and Constit10 were understandably critical of the interactions between the bureaucracy and the constituency office. The Conservative constituency staffer commented on the less than perfect interaction:

*The bureaucracy can be very leery sometimes because they may have been burnt in the past when working with another political staffer... When bureaucrats first hear you're a political staffer, you get a jaundiced eye.*

Obviously the kind of mistrust that Constit 10 describes can work against the constituency worker's goal in helping the Member carry out his primary duty as an agent of local concerns.

Both Constit 2 and Constit 10 talked more about the communication challenges they faced in trying to work with the bureaucracy. When asked, "How can the communication between the constituency office and the bureaucracy be improved?" Constit 10 responded:

*The thing is that people in rural areas are not familiar with the jargon a bureaucrat may use, so that the constituent doesn't have a clue. The bureaucrat needs to communicate better with the constituent and then with us. Bureaucrats tend to work in a cubicle and they're separated from the real world. We deal directly with the issues – there is a balance needed.*

Again, the importance of effective communication and working together to achieve a common goal is prominent in her answer. I was extremely impressed with the response from NDP staffer Constit 2 to my question: "How effective do you believe constituency work is in affecting the operations of the bureaucracy?" Constit 2 stated:

*Not as effective as it could be. Bureaucracy should ask more questions of constituency staff. There are no mechanisms in the bureaucracy to ask constituency staff about evaluating them.  
A lot of information from the constituency office does not filter back to the bureaucracy. The constituency office is seen more as a PR office, not an agency to make change.*

*Constituency staffers are not political officers. The constituency office is a non-partisan office that serves the general public; they are staffers of the government of Ontario. The bureaucracy does not take use of that capacity. Policy can be made based on front-line information gotten from constituency staffers. The bureaucracy can use this information to improve, as this information is coming from a 'non-partisan' office. The symbiosis that should exist, doesn't.*

*I recognize that bureaucracy gets called for a lot of policy things, but if the constituency office is receiving front line information, constituency office data should be used to develop policy to improve the situation. That resolves a lot of your problems. By knowing what goes on at the ground-level can make the bureaucracy's job more effective and easier thereby making the constituency job more effective.*

Constit 2 rendered a well-articulated argument that emphasizes the point that effective communication is lacking. It is unfortunate that this factor persists, and will essentially have a negative impact on the MPP's role as an agent of local concerns.

To continue the discussion, another fairly conflictual relationship is that between the MPP & constituency office and the MPP liaison.

### **MPP & Constituency Office and the MPP Liaison**

During my internship, I have come to understand that the function of the MPP liaison is to act as the go-between the MPP and the Ministry. Queen's Park office staff and the constituency office staff contact the MPP liaison on behalf of the respective MPP to get information about a particular issue/local concern that is related to that liaison's ministry. The MPP liaison is expected to expeditiously follow up with the MPP's staff, providing timely advice, information or assistance regarding the local issue at hand. Based on my understanding of this interaction, I asked all of my participants, "How helpful do you think the MPP liaisons are in assisting you and/or your staff regarding constituency concerns?" Four of the thirteen respondents had a purely conflictual relationship with the MPP liaisons. Conservative long-term Member 5 stated:

*Poor to unsatisfactory. MPP liaisons tend to be the lowest ranked staff in the Minister's office – it's an entry-level position for persons aspiring to work in policy or communications in a Minister's office. As such their time there is short. They don't have a vast knowledge of the issues... My recollection of the earlier days is that the MPP liaisons you used to be more aggressive, they tended to be more effective, and hungrier. Then by 2003 when we were on our fourth*



*generation of staff, there was a lot of turnover to the private sector and they were as they are today which would be poor to unsatisfactory.*

*When we were in government, we had a rule where if an MPP calls a Ministry, you would return that call in the same day. In reality we tend to go around the MPP liaison and straight to the civil servant. We've been around now for 10 years, and if we know what part of the Ministry solves the problem we'll go directly to that particular civil servant.*

Conservative long-term Member 7 shared his colleagues' sentiments:

*My staff finds [the MPP liaisons] horrible and useless. Mike Harris insisted that the receptionists and MPP liaisons be the best on our staff; that is a rule, because it's the first face that the public gets and that your colleagues get. We also had a rule that you had to call back the MPPs in one hour, and we enforced it.*

Conservative Constit10 also expressed her dissatisfaction:

*I'd rather cut off my arm than deal with an MPP liaison. They do not respond in time. They don't have the information. They are like the middlemen. Even on and off government, they were useless. There's no point in calling at all. I'd rather just open my phone book and contact any bureaucrat.*

Likewise, NDP Constit2 felt the same when asked about the MPP liaisons:

*They are pretty slow to get back. I can understand why. I usually go to Info Go and get to members of the bureaucracy directly. I prefer to bypass the MPP liaisons.*

If the purpose of the MPP liaison is to assist the MPP and his staff with inquiries regarding how a particular Ministry affects a set of interests and concerns in the Member's riding, the conflictual relationship described above works counter to the MPP successfully carrying out his primary duty as an agent of local concerns.

However, the discussion of the MPP/constituency office/MPP liaison would be incomplete if I were to concentrate solely on the negative feedback. Truly, other MPPs were not as critical of the MPP liaison, and some participants even acknowledged the good work these people continue to do. Member 1 mentioned:

*They try hard. It's difficult in very high profile ministries like health because they over burdened with too many requests and this makes it difficult for them to respond to a lot of things. I think the main effort is usually there, so if I had to break down, I'd give them a 7.*

Liberal Constit 3 described the MPP liaisons as *very helpful and much needed to all offices.*

Nonetheless, I tended to appreciate the more balanced answers from Liberal short-term Parliamentary Assistant Member 8 and Liberal Member 9:

M8: *MPP liaisons can be good, bad or ugly*

M9: *Relatively good but unfortunately inconsistent from Ministry to Ministry. There should be more of a consistent understanding of what the MPP liaison should do. It should never be seen as a potential party politics type of game. Unfortunately I've seen it done in both governments with the same end which is to block a party from getting information on both ends*

At the end of the day, the purpose of the MPP liaison is to act as an intermediary between the Member and the Ministry. When the interaction is positive, and the MPP liaison is efficiently meeting the needs of the Member and his staff – even if only just to follow up with a call or e-mail – then this interaction can be perceived as facilitating in the Member's desire to act as an agent of local concerns. Otherwise, a problematic relationship is frustrating for all parties involved and antithetical to meeting the needs of the Member and the people he/she represents.

The next relationship to explore is that between the MPP and the Minister.

### **MPP and Minister**

During the interview process, I learned that sometimes when an issue is so pressing and/or so moving, the backbench MPPs believe that if they want something done about it expeditiously, they have to go after it with vigor. It is understood that sometimes e-mails, letters and phone calls are not nearly as effective as the MPP talking to the Minister personally. Based on the Member's responses, this is certainly the case; many of them talked about the efficacy of speaking one-on-one with Ministers regarding a number of local concerns. I asked Liberal long-term Member 1, "Do you believe that the backbench MPP can have a substantial effect on the level of service provided by the bureaucracy?"

In response, the Member stated:

*A little bit, unless in directly speaking to the Minister who then takes it seriously, checks into it and finds that it is a case for some sort of change and decides to do something about it. But on their own, no. I remember sending a letter to a Minister and I get a letter back saying that the Minister does not have time to*

*meet with you, but thank you for your concern. So I brought the letter to the Minister and asked her if that was the case. She said, well give me that, and she saw that she had actually signed it. Then she said, no I will meet with you. What should have happened is that someone at the bureaucracy should have tipped her off and said, Listen, this is another MPP. Any Minister, if he/she is smart becomes aware very soon that when you get an elected person calling you on something, because they don't do it every day, then obviously something is important.*

Another success story came from Conservative, long-term Member7:

*I met with Minister Bountrogianni yesterday and she was excellent – she is an exception. One day in the House, I went to her and asked her for a meeting and with four weeks, we got the meeting with Children Aids Society was just delighted to meet the Minister face to face...she did the right thing; she was responsive. She didn't make me go through the bureaucrats or the MPP liaison. But she is an exception to the rule.*

The best success stories came from Conservative Member 10:

*I've had success both in and out of government in terms of the interpretation of policy. Being in government, there were two nursing stations in the riding that were initially turned down by the Ministry of Health and they were turned down based on the rule that the applicant didn't seem aware of, that they couldn't have a nursing station within 80 kilometres of the mother hospital. And I was able to successfully get those two nursing stations approved that had been formally turned down. I would say that was more by direct personal relations with the Minister, by being persistent with the Minister, not with bureaucracy. Because it wasn't a regulation and there was not a legislative change required. He was able to make that change. Another example I have of dealing directly with the Minister is when I served on a committee – Estimates Committee – so when he was there, I asked him every riding related health issue that I could get away with including concerns from [my riding] that had to do with the new hospital. I had to get the Minister's attention, and it was an important issue to me and I wanted it to be approved. So it wasn't so much the bureaucracy, but it was having a good relationship with the Minister, and I think it's important whether your in Opposition or not. For example, another issue that was important to our riding was the closure of the emergency department of [my riding] hospital. We needed direct intervention and the bureaucracy on its own couldn't do anything to solve that problem so the Minister had to get involved. So I was able to get Smitherman to come up to [my riding] and meet with the doctors and the hospital board and try to resolve the issue, and that was a pretty significant issue in my riding because we had campaigns, petitions, public meetings. So that's important, that even in Opposition you can have relations with the Minister and he could easily have said no I'm not coming, you're not your own.*

Of course, some MPPs were less successful in receiving a positive response from the Minister; this frustrates the Member's efforts to fulfill his primary duty as agent of local concerns. NDP Member2 stated:

*I've had some cooperation with Monte Kwinter's office, I've had some cooperation with some of the other offices, but the Bountrogianni one, that's one of the strangest. We had a case of an autistic child in [my riding], the mother has been down here to the Legislature. We have asked questions and [the Minister] has said she will assist. We have sat down at this very table with two bureaucrats who promised me an answer. This was following four months of repeated requests within 24 hours. This was about six weeks ago. I've raised it again in the House and I'm not getting any answer whatsoever. And it's a simple question: Tell me when the family can expect for the child to make it to the top of the list? Is this a month process? A year? Two years? Never? That's all they want to know. Bureaucrats refuse to tell me. The Minister refuses to tell me. They sit there and tell me they'll get an answer for me in twenty four hours. They are worthless to their word.*

The actor constellation most closely related to the conflictual relationship between the MPP and the Minister is 'The Battle of the Sexes...a member of the large class of "games of coordination with conflict over distribution."' <sup>8</sup> In this constellation, 'when played out as a noncooperative game with simultaneous moves and without the possibility of prior communication, there is no way in which the players can be certain to reach either of the preferred outcomes.' <sup>9</sup> To explain, the Member must ensure that he/she has communicated his/her concern about a local issue to the Minister in order for the Minister to consider which action he/she should take. Based on the assumption that both the Member and the Minister has the interest of the constituents as priority, both sides – the Minister and the MPP – will have to negotiate if the final outcome/action will be for the benefit of the public and sufficiently address the local concern at hand. Coordination with the chance of achieving a less than optimal outcome is better than noncoordination. As evidenced in the cases of the MPPs responses above, most interactions between the MPP and the individual Minister usually ends in some agreement. When the relationship between the MPP and the Minister is not so conflictual, then the constellation resembles the "Assurance game, [where] the players have a clear and common interest in coordinating...which will provide both parties with their best payoff." <sup>10</sup> We see the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

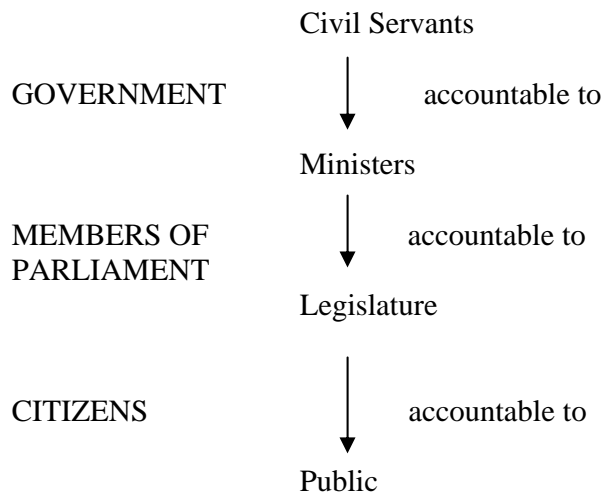
<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 73

Assurance game played out more clearly in the stories from Members 1, 7 and 10. Both mixed-motive games are very similar in certain aspects, however one situation is more conflictual than the other, hence the MPPs/players of the Assurance game are more capable of asserting their role as agents of local concerns relative to those MPPs/players involved in the Battle of the Sexes scenario.

Finally, the last relationship to explore is that between the Minister and the bureaucracy.

### Minister and Bureaucracy

Ministerial responsibility is one of three constitutional conventions in Canada. Ministerial responsibility is further broken down into collective ministerial responsibility and individual ministerial responsibility. One component of individual ministerial responsibility is that ‘ministers must answer to the legislature, in the form of explanation or defence, for their actions and for all of the actions of their departmental public servants.’<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the public service/bureaucracy is accountable to the Minister, the Minister is accountable to the Legislature and the Legislature is accountable to the public.<sup>12</sup> Refer to Figure 1 below:



<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Kernaghan, “East Block and Westminster: Conventions, Values, and Public Service,” in ed. Christopher Dunn, *The Handbook of Canadian Public Administration*, Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002, Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> David Docherty, “Parliamentarians and Government Accountability,” in ed. Martin W. Westmacott and Hugh P. Millon, *Public Administration and Policy: Governing in Challenging Times*, (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada, 1999).

Now, given the important accountability link between the Minister and his ministerial staff, I will attempt to explain how the relationship between these two players will greatly affect the MPP carrying out his role as an agent of local concerns.

First consider the MPP responses to my question, “Do you believe that the selection of Cabinet Members – the leaders of the Ministries – has a direct impact on the response time of a particular Ministry to a particular concern? Does the choice of Minister have an impact on the quality of service?” Short-term serving Liberal Parliamentary Assistant stated:

*I think it has a big effect. Many times the Minister will put a stamp on the Ministry and determine how the people will work. As with the Minister of Health, he has a very open, informal approach - everybody calls him George - and he has a certain way of doing things and getting things done, and he expects people to kind of be working at that same speed. I think they do influence over time.*

Here we see how the Minister is seen as a Leader in his Ministry; he has taken charge of his staff and ensured that the Ministry operates based on his directives. NDP Member 2 does not pinpoint a particular Minister in his/her response, however he answers the question from a more interesting vantage point:

*The Minister definitely affects the quality of service. There are some Ministers who are better at their job and are gung-ho to provide that quality of service and there are others who are laid back and let the bureaucracy do what the bureaucracy wants to do.*

Notice how the Member talks about the importance of the Minister retaining a leadership position within his own Ministry. It should be remembered that the Minister is accountable to the Legislature, which includes all the MPPs; it is not the bureaucracy that is accountable to the MPP, so it is not the bureaucracy that should set the tone of the Ministry.

This is evident in Conservative Member 10's response to my question:

*The most important thing is ministerial direction. There are some strong Ministers in any government and many weak Ministers. The weak ones will let the bureaucracy run things itself. The way it should work is that the Ministers make the policy and the bureaucracy carries out the policy. This will be effective in determining what the bureaucracy actually does*

Essentially, the Minister should always remain in command of his staff, as it is the Minister whom the MPP can approach in the MPP's capacity as an agent of local concerns. Conservative Member 10 went on to say:

*How the Minister directs the bureaucracy makes a big difference. For example, when we were in government and Frank Klees was the Minister of Transportation, I had a roads problem – we had a salt contamination [with one of the cities in my riding] First of all he arranged a meeting pretty quickly, and at the meeting he directed his deputy minister to take action on that specific issue. The specific Minister does make a difference... It's the Minister who would have to make the policy change...*

Mr. Klees is seen to have embraced the leadership role within his ministry. Note how the MPP realizes that if his concern is to be effectively addressed, he must take the issue to the Minister – not the civil service. The Member knows that it is the Minister that can make the real changes, and based on the chain of accountability, it is the Minister that SHOULD be in charge of making those changes. Here we see the importance of the Minister taking a leadership role in his/her Ministry. If the Minister takes responsibility for his/her leadership position in his/her Ministry, the MPP has a better chance at having his/her local concerns considered.

So now that the relationships between the key players have been described, and the effect of these relationship on the MPP fulfilling his/her role as an agent of local concern has been explained, I will address the question: How can the interaction between political actors, bureaucrats and constituency workers be ameliorated?

#### **IMPROVING THE SERVICE DELIVERY OF THE BUREAUCRACY**

During the interview process I learned about a number of re-occurring constituency issues that the MPP has endeavoured to address during his/her term in office. I found that certain issues were quite commonplace for all offices, including those related to the Registrar General Office, Family Responsibility Office, Ontario Disabilities Support Program, attaining birth certificates, providing affordable housing to constituents, lack of funding for farmers, long waiting times for health and long-term care, doctor shortages, Workers Compensation, attaining health cards, etc. Of course, there were also issues that were typical to the Member's riding, ie. rural riding challenges like the development of

rural infrastructure, low student enrollments in rural areas, problems with application approvals for the Northern Health Travel Grant, etc. With so many problems, I asked the interviewees for their feedback on how the system can be improved so that they would be able to assert themselves in an easier fashion as agents of local concerns. Here are a few suggestions:

M2: *Today the government needs to invest more in new resources and more staff. Government needs to invest more into the civil service. Having worked in the civil service before, I know when problems arise and civil servants feel disgruntled, they tend to put down their pens, stop working and let the work pile up. Government needs to hire more people, but more bureaucrats at the lower level. We have enough senior bureaucrats.*

M3: *I used to be the Director of Technical Training and Development in Supply and Services Canada, and I know the importance of training. Workshops are very useful; People question whether the workshops are really necessary, and they complain that it's a waste of time, but there is always a section in there that you don't know. As for the FRO, more resources are needed in this office, like better computer systems.*

M4: *Given that I represent a rural riding, the bureaucracy must understand that it's not a cookie cutter - one size does not fit all. The bureaucrat familiar with how their decisions affect people's lives. They don't know the terrain, they don't know the area. When they closed the Frost Centre in my riding, they didn't think of the economic impact. They need to be reminded how powerful they are. Also, there's the red tape. You can discourage people if you put too much red tape around an issue. The bureaucracy needs to simplify the process. It also makes it difficult to evaluate success and the process used. Someone has to be out there watching.*

M5: *In regards to the FRO, with the two individuals involved, the couple can develop their own relationship in how to get support. Get this out of the system, as opposed to them having to go to the system. Obviously there has to be checks and balances to ensure that people are not opting out of the system. There is too much active day-to-day involvement of the FRO instead of pursuing and enforcing. The most harshest cases are the ones where the former husband is not paying any compensation, can't find him, don't know where he works, so you put more muscle into the enforcement side then the more effective it would be in addition to reconsidering the management of files*

*[Move some of the major more remote government] back to Toronto and raise a major restructuring, because this is all around awful. They need a complete management shake-up; their computer systems don't seem to work there, customer service is deplorable. There are opportunities to have some services delivered by the private sector rather than the folks in government. The private*



*sector can deal with some of these services, perhaps have some incentive pay system so that they can get the response times down. Also if they make the right investments in computer systems then you see that if their response times are good then there would be rewards for that. Right now, there seems to be very little incentive for them for them to pick up their socks, so to speak. You need a significant shake-up especially in the ORG because this is a significantly stressful bureaucracy to deal with.*

**M8:** *Return the phone calls and e-mails on both sides. It's not rocket science – even just respond if even just to say that you may not have the information, but will get back to me. Make sure the information is accurate. The end is to serve the public and they should at the very least follow through. Don't mislead people, and be honest and say that I will get back to you. Sometimes, if there is a large issue, it can be overwhelming. There should be mechanisms put in place to ensure that a follow-up system works, perhaps create a log. Also, Ministers can lead by example.*

*In order to affect change in the bureaucracy, you have to value staff – to engage them in the process; to make your position clear; to have consistent communication; to have them consistently look at the gaps and fill them. Be a team player. Engage people in a meaningful way on how to implement policy, create policy and give them the mechanisms to evaluate their performance.*

*In turn, bureaucracy should not undervalue constituency people – they can learn about the biggest problems.*

**M9:** *[To improve communication between the constituency and the bureaucracy] there must be trust, respect, define what we should be doing between the constituency office and the bureaucracy and that we're here to serve the public, not a potential master of a rule book. Firstly, it should actually be accessibility: The awful answering voice recording system is absolutely ridiculous – get rid of it. I've actually seen it happen where I was sitting in someone's office, and they watched the phone as it clicked over to their voice message, and all the time the recording says, 'Your call is important to us.'*

**M10:** *As I've said, the MPPs should have full, unfettered access to the bureaucracy because you can develop relationship and whether there's wiggle room at all, that can make a difference.*

## CONCLUSION

I am grateful for the opportunity to research a topic that I have grown increasingly more interested in during my internship. I have enjoyed watching my two Members act out their role as agents of local concerns; both Members have certainly taught me the importance of advocating for the interests of ones community. It is understandable why these MPPs take such painstaking efforts to ensure that their constituents' concerns are voiced and relatively expeditiously addressed, and their work is quite commendable.

As a result of this research paper, I have developed a much greater appreciation and respect for the constituency-oriented MPP, and for the other political and non-political actors that facilitate the Member's efforts to advance his/her local concerns. Even though it is disconcerting to hear the Members recount some of their stories about how difficult it is to work with the bureaucracy and the Ministers, I know that that is the situation that exists among actors within the political sphere. As evidenced in the data, communication ties need to be established and/or strengthened; all actors need to understand the roles, limitations and intentions of each other; and everyone must appreciate the value of each other working towards the fulfillment of a common goal, ie. to provide quality service to the people of Ontario. Only then will the victimization of the bureaucracy be curbed, the misunderstandings between political and non-political actors subside, and the goal of the backbench MPP as an agent of local concerns be fully realized.

## APPENDIX 1

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

#### Exploring the Relationship between the Backbench MPP and the Bureaucracy

1. What do you believe is the role of the Member of Provincial Parliament?
2. Would you describe yourself as 'constituency-oriented'? Explain.
3. 'Overseeing the public administration is one of the principal functions of any parliament.' – Woodrow Wilson  
Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. How would you rate the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to the constituency concerns of your office? (On a scale of 1 – 10, with 10 being the most responsive.) Explain why you have chosen this rating.
5. How helpful do you think the MPP liaisons are in assisting you and your staff regarding constituency concerns?
6. **Long-standing Member:** How has the relationship between your constituency office and the bureaucracy changed over the past years? Does the change in government over the years have a substantial effect on the type of service received?
7. How can the communication between the constituency office and the bureaucracy be improved?
8. Do you believe that the selection of Cabinet Members – the leaders of the Ministries – has a direct impact on the response time of a particular Ministry to a particular concern? Does the choice of Minister have an impact on the quality of service?
9. Which re-occurring constituency issue(s) is/are of particular concern? How well do you believe the bureaucracy is addressing this/these concern(s)? How can the bureaucracy improve?
10. What do you believe is the most effective measure used by the Legislature to affect the operations of the bureaucracy? (Question period? Committee work? Ombudsman office? Increasing/Decreasing ministerial funding?)
11. How effective do you believe constituency work is in affecting the operations of the bureaucracy?
12. Do you believe that the backbench MPP can have a substantial effect on the level of service provided by the bureaucracy?  
If No, why not? If Yes, how?

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