

## THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES

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## THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES

### INTRODUCTION

Parliamentary secretaries are members of the government party who are appointed by the prime minister to assist cabinet ministers with their parliamentary duties. Under the direction of their ministers, parliamentary secretaries handle routine matters in the House of Commons, engage in committee work, and assume some extra-parliamentary responsibilities.

Parliamentary secretaries act as a link between ministers and parliamentarians. Some may be given special assignments as well. Moreover, the office can serve as a training ground for future cabinet ministers or as a way of rewarding members of the government caucus.

Under the *Parliament of Canada Act*,<sup>(1)</sup> the number of parliamentary secretaries may not exceed the number of ministers. Some ministers may not be assigned a parliamentary secretary, while others may be assigned more than one. Although parliamentary secretaries may be sworn to the Queen's Privy Council for Canada – as they were under Prime Minister Paul Martin – this has not generally been the case.

Parliamentary secretaries receive a mandate letter from the prime minister, and carry out their responsibilities as set out by their minister.<sup>(2)</sup> Their term of office is 12 months, which may be renewed, and they are paid an additional salary of \$14,600. As public office holders, they are subject to the *Conflict of Interest and Post-Employment Code for Public Office Holders*, in addition to being subject to the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons* in their capacity as members of the House of Commons.

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(1) R.S., 1985, c. P-1.

(2) Government of Canada, *Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers*, 2006, p. 8, [http://pm.gc.ca/grfx/docs/guide\\_e.pdf](http://pm.gc.ca/grfx/docs/guide_e.pdf).

## THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES

According to the guidelines set out in *Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers*, parliamentary secretaries have House and public duties and department-related duties.

In the House, parliamentary secretaries help ministers maintain contacts with senators and other members of the House of Commons. They play a liaison role within the government caucus, particularly on matters regarding private Members' business. When the minister is away from the House, parliamentary secretaries may also be called upon to answer policy questions during Question Period.<sup>(3)</sup> As well, when the subject of an Opposition Day concerns the minister's department, the parliamentary secretary usually lines up speakers from the government side.<sup>(4)</sup>

Under the Standing Orders, parliamentary secretaries may:

- make a statement during the time devoted to "Statements by Members" (whereas ministers may not);<sup>(5)</sup>
- table documents in the House on behalf of a minister;<sup>(6)</sup>
- speak on behalf of a minister during adjournment proceedings;<sup>(7)</sup>
- act on behalf of a minister during consideration of the main estimates of a department in Committee of the Whole;<sup>(8)</sup> and
- act on behalf of a minister during debate on a motion for the production of papers.<sup>(9)</sup>

Because they work under the direction of a minister, however, parliamentary secretaries do not pose questions during Question Period<sup>(10)</sup> and they are ineligible to introduce

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(3) *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

(4) Library of Parliament, Information Services, "The Parliamentary Secretaries," Information Sheet E240, July 1998.

(5) House of Commons, *Standing Orders*, 5 April 2006, S.O. 30(5).

(6) *Ibid.*, S.O. 32(2).

(7) *Ibid.*, S.O. 38(5).

(8) *Ibid.*, S.O. 81(4)(a).

(9) *Ibid.*, S.O. 97(2).

(10) Robert Marleau and Camille Montpetit, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 2000, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/MarleauMontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?Lang=E>.

their own private Member's bills or motions.<sup>(11)</sup> They may not present government bills, either.<sup>(12)</sup>

Parliamentary secretaries are usually named to standing committees having mandates in their area of responsibility. There, they represent the minister's views and address political issues that may arise. They share departmental information and may work with committee chairs to plan appearances of ministers and departmental officials.<sup>(13)</sup>

With regard to department-related duties, the prime minister may assign parliamentary secretaries specific policy-related priorities. In addition, while overall responsibility and accountability remain with the minister, he or she may delegate specific policy development duties to a parliamentary secretary. As indicated above, parliamentary secretaries also ensure liaison between parliamentary committees and the department.<sup>(14)</sup>

Parliamentary secretaries may also perform extra-parliamentary duties for the minister by fulfilling speaking engagements, attending ceremonies, or meeting delegations.<sup>(15)</sup>

## **EVOLUTION OF THE OFFICE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY**

The first parliamentary secretaries were appointed during World War I, when Prime Minister Robert Borden appointed three of them to assist heavily burdened ministers. However, with the defeat of the Borden government in 1921, the office lapsed. It was revived during World War II, when in 1943 Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King appointed seven parliamentary assistants, as he referred to them.<sup>(16)</sup> After the war, King continued to appoint parliamentary assistants on an informal basis, as did his successor, Prime Minister Louis

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(11) House of Commons, *Standing Orders*, 5 April 2006, S.O. 87(1)(a)(ii).

(12) House of Commons, *Glossary of Parliamentary Procedure*, March 2006, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/house/glossary/gloss-e.htm>.

(13) Government of Canada (2006), p. 8.

(14) *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

(15) Library of Parliament (1998).

(16) David Gamache Hutchison, "Parliamentary Secretaries in the 36th Parliament," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 23, Spring 2000, p. 21, [http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/Publications/dr-rd/dr-rd\\_e.pdf](http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/Publications/dr-rd/dr-rd_e.pdf).

St. Laurent. A number of the parliamentary assistants appointed during this period served for extended periods, while others were subsequently elevated to the ministry.<sup>(17)</sup>

The appointment of parliamentary secretaries was formalized in 1959 when Parliament passed the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act*. It limited the number of parliamentary secretaries to 16.<sup>(18)</sup> Under prime ministers John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson, they often remained in place for several years and some were elevated to the ministry.<sup>(19)</sup>

In 1971, the Act was amended to make the number of parliamentary secretaries correspond to the number of ministers.<sup>(20)</sup> At the same time, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau indicated that he intended to rotate incumbents at two-year intervals.<sup>(21)</sup>

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney expanded the number of parliamentary secretaries when he appointed a large number of secretaries of state. He also returned to the earlier practice of reappointing parliamentary secretaries for several years and appointing some to the ministry.<sup>(22)</sup> In 1985, the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* was consolidated as part of the *Parliament of Canada Act*.

Also in 1985, the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the McGrath Committee) recommended that parliamentary secretaries be prohibited from being members of standing committees in the area of their responsibility. The Mulroney government initially accepted the recommendation, but in 1991 it lifted the prohibition.<sup>(23)</sup>

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien revived the practice of rotating parliamentary secretaries every two years. In a news release issued when the second group of parliamentary secretaries was appointed, he said: “We have such an abundance of committed and talented MPs

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(17) Peter Dobell, “Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotation,” *Policy Matters*, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 2001, p. 14, <http://www.irpp.org/pm/archive/pmvol2no4.pdf>.

(18) Privy Council Office, *Guide to Canadian Ministries Since Confederation*, 2001, [http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?language=E8Page=Publication8doc=Min/intro\\_e.htm](http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?language=E8Page=Publication8doc=Min/intro_e.htm).

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

(20) Hutchison (2000), p. 21.

(21) Dobell (2001), p. 12.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 16.

(23) Hutchison (2000), p. 26.

in the Government Caucus that I believe it is important to give as many of them as possible a chance to gain this valuable executive experience.”<sup>(24)</sup>

When Paul Martin became prime minister in December 2003, he ended the practice of automatic rotation after a two-year term and assigned parliamentary secretaries specific policy responsibilities. He also appointed parliamentary secretaries to the Privy Council and said they would be invited to cabinet meetings when a policy matter for which they had specific duties was to be discussed.<sup>(25)</sup>

When Stephen Harper became prime minister in February 2006, he returned to the earlier practice of not appointing parliamentary secretaries to the Privy Council.<sup>(26)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Parliamentary secretaries play a vital, if often unrecognized, role in assisting cabinet ministers and providing a link between ministers and parliamentarians. Given that their role is largely defined by the prime minister, however, the nature of the office has changed over the years. At times appointments have tended to be lengthy, while at others they have been limited to two years. Some prime ministers have used the office as a proving ground for future ministers, while others have used it as way of giving executive experience to many members of the government party. Because the office is loosely defined, it is well suited to meeting the administrative and political needs of the government of the day.

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(24) Privy Council Office, News Release, “Prime Minister appoints Parliamentary Secretaries,” 23 February 1996, <http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?Language=E&Page=pmarchive>.

(25) Privy Council Office, *Ethics, Responsibility, Accountability: An Action Plan for Democratic Reform*, 2004, p. 10, [http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/Publications/dr-rd/dr-rd\\_e.pdf](http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/Publications/dr-rd/dr-rd_e.pdf).

(26) Office of the Prime Minister, News Release, “Prime Minister announces Parliamentary Secretaries,” 7 February 2006, <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?category=1&id=685>.