

Public Servants and Parliamentary Committees:

Fostering Effective Relationships

Notes for Remarks by

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to the

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Public Service Parliamentary Relations Officers

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Thank you, Mme Chairman, for your kind words of introduction.

I am delighted to be here this morning at the third annual seminar for Public Service Parliamentary Relations Officers. And I am honoured, indeed flattered, to have been asked to give this leadoff address.

My predecessors on this podium – Bob Marleau and Gerry Yanover – are well known for their knowledge of Parliament. I have no such distinction here on the Hill. But I do know a bit about the Public Service, and I have had some experience with in dealing with Parliamentary committees. I have also done some writing on the subject.

So that's what I want to talk about this morning – the relationship between public servants and parliamentary committees. In particular, I want to talk about what you can do, as parliamentary relations officers, to foster an effective and appropriate relationship between public servants and the committees of the House and Senate.

Your job is critically important in any public service organization, and in the really well-run departments it is recognized as such.

- You serve as a unique interface between your department (or agency) and the political process, as it is played out in the House and the Senate
- You have the opportunity - and the obligation - to understand that political process better than anyone else in your department except perhaps your counterpart in the Minister's office.
- You (or many of you) get the brief the Minister every day for Question Period, and making sure the required briefing materials have been prepared for the Minister's use.
- You have the delightful privilege of calling down into the department for speeches on Opposition Days. And then you have the no-less delightful duty to listen to them!
- Many of you are responsible for ensuring that the day's debates are distributed to the appropriate people in the department, so that those who need to know are made aware of what has happened – what was said, what was promised, what hostages to fortune have been left on the parliamentary battlefield.

These are functions that are performed largely, though not exclusively, in support of Ministers and other elected officials – the Secretary of State or the Parliamentary Secretary.

Another side to your job, and one that often receives less attention is your role in support of the Deputy Minister or Agency Head and other officials in their appearances before Parliamentary Committees.

While I wouldn't say this is as important as your role in supporting the Minister, it can be just as difficult and it is certainly much less understood or appreciated.

I want to talk to day about:

- why this function matters
- what needs to be borne in mind about the role of officials appearing before Parliamentary committees
- what can go wrong, and
- what you can do to help things to go right.

Why it Matters

I will start by pointing out that appearances by officials before parliamentary committees are derivative of a more fundamental relationship, which is that of the Minister to Parliament and its committees.

It is important to bear this in mind, and to impress it on your departmental colleagues – *departmental official do not appear before Parliament in their own right. They are their on behalf of the Minister.*

The situation is somewhat different for those of you who work in agencies and Crown corps, but I'll get to that in a minute. The basic relationship is that of the Minister to Parliament.

When officials appear before committee, it is because both the Committee and the Minister find that it serves Parliament's interests best to have the knowledgeable public servants appear in order to provide the detailed information on programs or policies that Parliament requires.

Public servants are there to inform and explain – not to defend or justify the programs, policies or activities of the Government.

Of course, not all committee members understand this. Some (and only some) appear to think that officials are there to be held to account for what they have done.

Some committee members seem to hold the view that committees of the House and Senate ought to function like committees of the American House or Senate.

The fact is, the two systems are very different. We in Canada operate a system of responsible government – the Americans do not. In our system, it is Ministers, and not officials, who are responsible to the elected legislature. And it is therefore Ministers who carry the basic responsibility to answer before committees.

A word on appearances by representatives of agencies and Crown corporations. Your role is different from that of departmental officials, because your organization stands in a different relationship to Parliament. It is precisely because Parliament did not want a Minister directly responsible for your organization that it was created as it is.

Heads of Crown corps and agencies do answer directly to Parliament. They are there on their own behalf. They are like the Minister. But subordinate officials are in the same position as subordinate officials in departments – they are not accountable directly to Parliament – it is the head of the organization who is.

What can go wrong before Committee

What can go wrong? Well, as most of you know, nearly everything can go wrong, though it seldom does.

- Committee members can ambush the witness and treat them as if they were on trial
- Witnesses can be patronizing or disrespectful.
- Witnesses can reveal secrets about what was said to or by Ministers. Or they can volunteer information that was not requested by the committee, thereby getting the government into more trouble.
- Committee sessions can become antagonistic and frustrating for both sides. The Parliamentary process is itself frustrated and less effective than it should be. Members lose respect for public servants and vice versa.
- When this happens it is bad for Parliament, bad for the Government and bad for democracy.

The effective operation of Parliamentary committees is a cornerstone of effective Westminster government. As Parliamentary Relations Officers, you can do a lot to make our system work well.

How to help things go well

How to do that? Here are some suggestions from my experience both as an official and, more recently, as someone who has given advice to departmental officials on how to appear effectively before committee.

1. Make sure that every appearance by an official before committee is taken as the important event that it is – *officials should never take these things lightly, or go in unprepared.*
2. Make sure that every departmental witness understands their role and the limitations on that role. They are there on behalf of the Minister to inform and explain. They

are there to be of service, bearing in mind that they owe their professional allegiance to the Government and not to Parliament.

3. Develop a standard training module for witnesses, and make sure that every senior person (DM and ADM) has taken it.
4. Make sure that committee proceedings are followed with care – you owe the committee members the respect of knowing what they have been working on, what they're concerned about, what issues they are likely to raise – so that your witnesses can respond with the information the Parliamentarians want.
5. Invest some time in coaching your witnesses so that they understand how to be an effective witness:
 - be respectful
 - give the Committee a short opening statement, in both languages, well ahead of the committee session
 - be clear and concise; don't give long, rambling answers
 - answer the question; if you don't know the answer, say so, and offer to find out
 - don't answer in areas that you are not the expert on
 - don't allow yourself to be out in the position of speaking as a political person – you are there as a public servant
 - be patient -- don't allow yourself to be provoked.

I could offer many more little tips for witnesses, and you doubtless have thought of all of them. My point is simply this – committee appearances matter and officials should take them seriously.

If they do, if they know their stuff and can provide concise, accurate answers, they will find the whole experience to be very positive. They will find, as I have, that the experience of appearing before committee deepens their respect for Parliament and for the democratic process.

Thank you.