

How Different Are They? Comparison of Standing and Select Committees

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Introduction

Legislative committees are greatly respected by the members of the Assembly. These small in size and quiet (in comparison to the Chamber sittings) gatherings of about ten MPPs get the real work done around Queen's Park. In fact, according to some research on the Canadian Parliament, MPs are firm believers in the role of committees as direct policymaking bodies. This becomes evident when the members evaluate a committee as a successful one if it had an influence on government policy. At first glance, it is a fair expectation, especially for the opposition backbenchers in the majority government scenario, as it has been the case in Ontario since 2003. However, one should not overlook the fact that our committees are part of the Westminster parliamentary system, in which the government and the legislature are heavily fused. With growing partisanship in the Ontario Legislature and in a majority government situation, this inevitably means that the government itself becomes a primary lawmaker (Malloy 1996). Even though for a long time committees have been considered less polarized and more collegial than the legislature itself, today they grow to resemble a theatrical Chamber with party lines practically never crossed.

Malloy in his study of the 1989 GST inquiry argues that the committees are much more successful if they are looking at the policy issues when the members do not take a definitive political stand on them and when they do not feel obligated to comply with the party philosophy. Today, at Queen's Park such type of work is rarely observed in the system of standing committees. Typically, the government is in a rush to push through its own agenda, while the opposition is trying to be as vocal and radical as possible in its attempts to be noticed in the Liberal dominated parliament. Nonetheless, there is a room for the constructive work in the walls of the only functioning Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, which seems to be rising above the politics. It is characterized not only by productive work, high quality deputations and extensive traveling, but, even more importantly, by almost unimaginable in today's political climate cooperation across all three parties. Even though there is a general agreement on the need for more of a Select Committee type activities in the legislature, it appears that this type of committees will remain a rare exception dealing with relatively marginal for the government agenda issues that are not likely to become ballot box points.

First, this paper will step back in time to see what the historic functioning of the standing and select committees used to be. Next, it will demonstrate some features of the modern committee system leaning on the example of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. Finally, it will explain and analyze the success of today's Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, concluding that very little work like this could be actually achieved in our current system with growing partisanship and thirst for government total control.

Evolution of the committees

Historically, select committees have been viewed as superior over standing ones, mainly because they were called on very special occasions and had a specific focus. Select committees have been often known to have investigation as their primary focus and even referred to sometimes as equivalent of the executive's royal commission. A chief distinction between the latter and any select committee is that committee staff are primarily elected individuals whose investigative activities occupy only a small portion

of their time. Royal commissioners, in contrast, dedicate full time to the commission and therefore develop high quality expertise on the issue. Select committee members are politicians in the first place (Schindeler 1969). Standing committees in contrast to the select ones have been usually assigned a broad policy focus, such as agriculture, mining, education, etc. (White 1989).

Another key distinction between the select and standing committees, which was quite striking in the past and no longer today, was the availability of adequate staff for select committees. Interestingly, until the 1960s, staff provided for standing committees was the members of the press gallery, who were the only available personnel not tied to the government. Even though press gallery members enjoyed these duties, sometimes their work was clearly inadequate. By 1960, some members began to feel decidedly annoyed with not unusual absences of clerks that were juggling their committee responsibilities with covering news in the Legislative Assembly. In contrast, select committees have been traditionally known for having a professional and permanent staff support (Schindeler 1969).

One of the most obvious distinctions (which is again no longer the case in the modern system) between the two types of committees used to be their size. If standing committees in 1960s could consist of as many as 60 members, select ones were limited to no more than fifteen members, and the average size rarely amounted to more than ten. This might indicate higher expectations placed on this type of committees. It has always been short in existence, highly focused in its mandate, staffed with professionals as well as a permanent and relatively small number of members. For the maximum efficiency, there were generally no duplications of select committee memberships if more than one were to function at the same time. This way members could concentrate fully on one issue at hand and even become experts on it. This was never possible to achieve in standing committees.

Historically, standing committees have also been more numerous, at some points reaching the number of 16 committees per session, as it was the case in the early 1960s for instance. “By 1960 there were nearly four times as many committees as there had been in 1867 and more than twice as many as there had been at the turn of the century” (Schindeler 1969). In years like these and with the average of 50 members in a standing committee, one MPP might have had to sit on as many as eight different committees dealing with variety of issues. No wonder, members might have behaved as overwhelmed university students juggling full time course load with the assignments and deadlines that sometimes come all at once.

Schindeler theorizes that such progressive increase in the number of standing committees might have to do with the Government need to find something to do for its large majority. It did so however in a very inefficient way. In addition to the large number of members (that began to undermine the role of the committee as a more private and open for discussion forum), their schedule was extremely irregular and over 50% attendance was rather an exception. It might be that due to such dysfunctional situation very few business items were actually referred to the committees. Ironically, bills are the only items that are traditionally sent to committees, but at times as many as 1 or even no bills could be referred for committee review in 1960s. Between 1960 and 1964, a total of seventy two bills were debated in standing committees, at the time when more than twice as many received third reading in the House (Schindeler 1969).

Relative ineffectiveness of the standing committee system in the 1960s dates back to the nineteenth century. Large size (40-50 members) and irregular meetings prevented important legislative business being referred to them. In addition, many members maintained their outside employment and preferred devoting their mornings to it, instead of coming to a committee hearing, that very often were of no interest to them. As a result of these factors, standing committees started to lose their initial purpose – to scrutinized legislation. For over a century, standing committees were mostly occupied with the review of private and railway bills (White 1989). By creating massive and numerous committees, Government might have definitely found something for the members to do, but if any efficient work were to be accomplished in committees, they needed some immediate reforms.

In 1960, an unusual for that time experiment was conducted. Committees traditionally were not allowed to sit while the House stayed adjourned, even if it was a regular committee day. During one of the sessions of that year, it was decided that the House would adjourn from Tuesday to Thursday so that committees have enough time to meet on Wednesdays. However, it might have been due to absence of any discipline and real commitment to the committee work that the experiment failed resulting in no more efficient work. As premier Robarts pointed out few years later, some members apparently treated this attempt to improve committee productivity as a lucky opportunity to go home in the middle of the week. Reforms that were somewhat more successful followed four years later when the number of existing committees was reduced to ten from eighteen. One might only wonder how useless some committees had been if their number could be easily cut almost in half. Interestingly, even after this, what then considered to be a major committee reform, the average quorum for a fifty member committee remained no more than five to seven MPPs (Schindeler 1969). This might suggest that committee work remained a symbolic duty for the legislative backbenchers and occupied a role far away from the policy-making body.

Lack of media coverage

Keeping in mind these historic irregularities and poor attendance in the standing committees, it might not be surprising that media was rarely interested in the committees. Even today, however, after a series of committee reforms, attention of the press remains scarce in both select and standing committees, despite the members' firm belief in the most productive work being achieved in committees. Some MPPs, Liz Sandals from Guelph for example, suggested that "media is simply lazy; it is so much easier to go to the question period, do a quick scrum after it and fix up an article on 'circus du jour' than actually go to the committee and hear presenters and discussion that is happening in there." Liz Sandals could count on fingers of one hand how many times the media has shown up to the Select Committee, of which she has been a member since February, 2009. (Sandals 2010).

It is common for the press to drop by if approached and warned by an opposition member. A New Democratic (NDP) member from Nickel Belt France Gélinas recalls inviting the media to attend or at least pay attention if she were to pose a question or make a comment. However, she personally does not mind the absence of media in committees. When the media is present, many people become very limited in what they say. This is especially the case for the government backbenchers, who, for the most of the

time, remain in the shadow of the Premier and ministers when it comes to communicating with the public. Once reporters are spotted in the room, Liberals become quieter and tend to stick to their party lines more closely (Gélinas 2010). A Progressive Conservative (PC) MPP Sylvia Jones evaluates lack of media attention to the committees simply as a result of financial struggles that Queen's Park gallery experiences today, very similarly to the backbench and opposition offices. They do pick up on the bigger issues that come up in the committees by either actually sitting in or tracking *Hansard*. However, the gist of work that the committees perform remains outside of the medium attention (Jones 2010).

Despite this lack of interest, cameras are in the room, public can walk in freely into virtually every committee room, giving members an incentive to play partisan politics. In fact, it might be assumed that one of the reasons why some standing committees such as Public Accounts for instance have a relatively collegial reputation is because the report writing is happening in a closed session, or in camera. Liz Sandals pointed that "as soon as you take a debate off the camera, people start having a conversation." Since the time she has been on the Public Accounts committee, it has come to a consensus report for every single one that has been produced for about six years for this MPP (Sandals 2010).

Despite the relative success of the Public Accounts, room for adverse partisanship could be always found once the opportunity presents itself. A recent E-health scandal is a perfect example of how an opposition ready to use its partisan tools to carry out a division in the committee on a hot divisive topic. The story has been revolving for months around accusations of the Liberal government in distributing uncompetitive contracts and hiring excessive number of consultants while working on a system of electronic health records in Ontario. There is no surprise that this saga had remained a theme of the Question Period for quite some time; media had been tasting every moment of the scandal; and anybody who would try on purpose to remove oneself from the news on E-health could still not miss it. Thus, it would have been rather strange for the opposition members on the Public Accounts committee (whose main purpose is to control public expenditure) to abstain from throwing around partisan comments and scoring some points in the newspapers and radio shows. Throughout the duration of the E-Health saga, opposition's news release sections were overflowing with the most colourful expressions like "sweetheart deals", "1 billion dollar boondoggle", etc. Atmosphere in the Public Accounts was noticeably shaken (Sandals 2010).

Symbolic hearings on essential issues in Standing Committees

All MPPs interviewed for this paper agreed unanimously that committees, be it standing or select, remain the best available forum for public participation in the political process. "The most worthwhile part of the committees is when we allow Ontarians to come and make their deputations in front of us" (Gélinas 2010). However, Sylvia Jones, Progressive Conservative MPP from Dufferin-Caledon, believes that while nobody denies the wealth of the information brought in from outside of Queen's Park, there is room for scepticism even in regards to the public hearings. She noted that standing legislative committees are a mere extension of the Chamber. This is especially the case for the committees that review legislation: they are very narrowly cast and do not provide for a broad constructive discussion. She has sat on the numerous standing committees since elected in 2007 and can count on the finger of a single hand how many opposition

motions were accepted. Even though committees serve as the most open venue for public to contribute to the law-making process, this input could be easily manipulated by the government. “If you introduce a bill on Thursday and debate it on Monday and Tuesday afternoon and try to push it to a committee within a week, it becomes challenging for the public to put forward a reasonable deputation. Here Jones was referring to the *Bill 242, Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010*, which was introduced on February 17, 2010 for the very first time. Only two weeks later, on March 4, it was already be on the agenda of the Standing Committee on Social Policy. It is only one example, but it is rather a common practice than an exception for the government to push through their bills according to their own schedule with the minimal amount of consultation. If anything were to be changed in today’s system, it would be ensuring a mandatory time gap between the introduction of the bill and its consideration in the committees (Jones 2010).

Bill 218, Ontario Tax Plan for More Jobs and Growth Act, 2009, is another classic example of the symbolic role of the standing committees in the Ontario 39th parliament. A long title and a number of the bill might mean nothing to someone outside of Queen’s Park, however, infamous acronym HST (Harmonized Sales Tax), which is a part of this bill, can make average people on the street argue for hours. In the 2009 budget, Ontario government proposed a comprehensive tax package, which starting July 1, 2010 would combine the Retail Sales Tax with the federal Goods and Services Tax. Thus, so-called Harmonized Sales Tax would be applied to many items that might have been previously excluded from either provincial or federal taxation. The new tax has been promoted by the government as a beneficial transformation primarily for businesses, which would inevitably pass their savings on to the consumers (Minister of Finance Ontario 2009). Bill 218 has been a subject of parties’ confrontation since its very first introduction. Common sense logic would suggest that if it were such a controversial issue and committees presumably are the places where real debate is happening, this bill should have hung round in one of them for some time. In reality, the government decided that some two days of public consultations in the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs in Toronto would be sufficient. Two days that were put aside meant to accommodate 42 presenters in addition to a clause-by-clause consideration of the 175-page bill.

Progressive Conservative Party has decided to partake a similarly unrealistic goal by presenting the government with 500,000 amendments to the Bill 218 in electronic format as well as some 315,000 in hard copy (Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs 2009). Those who had a hard time imagining how much paper was needed for all these amendments might have stopped by the clerk’s office and see dozens of carton boxes filled with thousands of sheets that had to be photocopied ten times for each member. It would be hard to believe that this number of amendments was more than a confrontational statement. Liberal backbenchers might have had the right to blame opposition for wasting ink and paper, however, it was the government in the first place that decided to jam all the work into two sessions and pass the highly controversial bill before the House recessed for the Christmas break.

Once all the amendments arrived, they had to be dealt with. Every one of them was to be read out by the chair and recorded vote could be requested by any member. However, since the committee could sit officially only until midnight (many actually

seemed prepared to stay until the very end), after 5 pm, only the numbers of the amendments had to be called out; any requests for debate or voice votes were to be ignored. At that point, when exhausted and thirsty chair was losing her voice from robotically naming numbers and quieting down the members of the opposition insistently requesting a recorded vote on every single amendment, those who had faith in the productive committee work might have started to lose it. To spice it up, some government members joined the PC MPPs in robotically repeating “recorded vote”. The show lasted until the amendment number 3,964 and until MPPs’ endurance has reached its limit. Members’ creativity however seemed to be waking up at the very same time. In the sway of the dialogue between “amendment number 3,964” and “recorded vote”, someone came up with a brilliant loophole that made this torturous meeting stop. After close to twelve hours of the committee hearing (including breaks), the quorum (of 50%) seemed to be close to not being satisfied. One of the liberal MPPs quickly requested a 10 minute recess after which some members simply did not return to their seats, therefore, making the committee dysfunctional due to lack of quorum (Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs 2009). Those, for whom Question Period at Queen’s Park has always been the soap opera of the day, might have rethought their positions and started paying more attention to committees. They indeed might be quite entertaining!

It is hard for a non-partisan person to judge who is right and wrong in these circumstances. What becomes clear enough however, is that this committee, at least regarding this piece of legislation, differed very little from a typical theatrical debate in the Chamber. Liberal MPP from Oakville Kevin Flynn, who does believe that the legislative committees are part of the policy-making process, noted that he would probably feel quite ineffectual as an opposition backbencher (Flynn 2010). All MPPs interviewed for the paper firmly believe that committees should play an essential role in lawmaking. Bill 218 however serves as a perfect example of how this is far from reality, at least when it comes to the government driven legislation. “No surprise opposition is turning to simple name calling and government embarrassment and playing the game of a question period,” said Mr. Flynn.

Similarly to powerless opposition, presenters in front of the committees might as well feel quite ineffectual and restricted. It is not unusual that in the standing committees they might be easily cut off if the committee runs out of its strictly allotted time. This happens most often due to abundant and sometimes ridiculous points of order from the opposition after practically every statement from the government side. Sometimes it is painful to watch poor non-voting, presumably neutral, chair of the committee trying to find parliamentary language to quite down boiling opposition, so that presenters have enough time to speak. Usually, they have exactly 10 minutes to perform their presentation, followed by 5 minutes of questions from only one of the parties. Such one sided questioning could be limiting to a healthy debate, especially when a presenter clearly supports a position of the party whose turn it is to ask questions. No wonder, sometimes the committee discussion resembles very closely the time in the House debate when a Liberal backbencher poses a friendly question to a minister.

A success story of the Select Committee: What is the secret?

It was mentioned in the beginning of the paper that Select Committees have had historically a somewhat different function than the Standing ones. They were supposed to

investigate, report and recommend. Select Committees have been always excluded from reviewing and amending legislation, therefore having somewhat indirect impact on the lawmaking, but playing an important role in policy development. These committees are fairly specific in its focus and function for a relatively brief period of time until the investigation is completed. Select Committees are rare; there is on average one or two functioning Select Committees in a given year along with about nine permanent Standing ones (Malloy 1996).

Currently, at Queen's Park, a tri-party Select Committee is investigating the problems in the mental health and addictions system of Ontario. It is important to note that while a final decision about the establishment of the committee belongs to the government, this specific select committee was created immediately following a private member's motion by the PC member from Whitby Christine Elliott. On December 4, 2008, she moved that the Legislative Assembly establish a Select Committee with the special focus on such issues as the needs of children and residents of long-term care facilities and the lack of inter-ministerial coordination in the delivery of service (Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions Interim Report 2010). Besides the unanimous support in the House, the (then) Minister of Health and Long-Term Care David Caplan supported the motion passionately with condition that the wording of its mandate remains non-partisan and all committee proceedings are ensured to be as collegial as possible. Committee has completed some intense amount of work up to date, of which a recent interim report, summarizing the testimony of the presenters, is the best evidence. Even though the final and the most crucial report with recommendations is still to be produced, every single MPPs on the committee admitted that the Select Committee has been the most productive, effective and personally satisfactory activity they are engaged in at Queen's Park.

Why is it so that hostile partisanship that is overtaking Queen's Park in the Chamber and Standing Committee debates practically disappears in the Committee Room 1 where the Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions sits every Wednesday afternoon. For Kevin Flynn an explanation seemed to be fairly simple. "We (both politicians and public) tend to think that a political spectrum in Ontario is wide and that the parties on the opposite sides of the political spectrum would always find something to disagree on. I believe that this view is fairly simplistic and quite mistaken; our political differences are not as huge as we sometimes portray them to be; and current Select Committee is a great proof of this. The committee is acquiring a very good reputation; everything is done by consensus, everyone just agrees" (Flynn 2010).

Representation of the Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions was not intended to be non-partisan as it was formed in a traditional way with the government majority. In fact, Select Committees should not be thought of as non-partisan by definition. It is often an initiative of the chair to set up a tone in the committee. This is exactly what Kevin Flynn manages to do in the Mental Health and Addictions Committee (Sandals 2010). "Politicians from time to time are capable of rising above their self interest and partisanship," noted Mr. Flynn. He believes that the government party member have a great role to play in creating a truly non-partisan atmosphere. It the responsibility of the Liberal backbenchers to make the opposition feel that it is being treated seriously and with respect, its comments accepted and implemented (Flynn 2010).

Today's select committee is able to work so harmoniously and productively because members could see common goal in this investigation and know they all will be able to contribute to the report (even if it does not translate into policy). Most of the participating members agreed that mental health just cannot be a divisive issue by definition. All MPPs (even if they come from different parties) are well familiar with the frustration as to how mental health and addiction issues are managed in Ontario. Be it a member of the family or a constituent, very often the system failed them. On top of the malfunctioning system, stigma towards mentally ill remains strong and sentiments against letting mentally ill into so-called normal world could be still very pronounced. In the interim report that the committee completed recently all members confirmed their hopes to give voice to those individuals who are so often ignored and stigmatized. Not long after the hearings started, it became very clear that what people with mental problems needed was "a home, a friend and a job." (Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions Interim Report 2010)

The only difficulty with the report so far has been the enormous amount of information that had been falling on members from all over Ontario. Beginning in April of 2009, the Committee had held extensive public hearings, which included the presenters coming to Queen's Park and members traveling to different communities. Besides major urban centres such as Ottawa, London, North Bay, Sudbury, the Committee visited several First Nations communities and health organizations. In total, the members held 25 hearing during which they listened to the testimony of over 200 individuals and organizations. In addition, the Committee received numerous written submissions, articles and other material related to mental health and addictions. "This is exactly the beauty of the truly productive committee work," pointed out France Gélinas. "When we are doing the research ourselves, it takes incredible amount of time to put something together, establish connections and identify the problem. When public hearings are held, people with incredible expertise come and simply feed us well-researched, high quality information" (Gélinas 2010). The only problem with it is its abundance. The main task was to condense hundreds of presentations into a 35 page summary. These, however, are normal healthy difficulties that the Committee has managed to work through.

Mental health and addictions issues – non-partisan or simply ignored?

The question that might arise is why is it that the mental health and addiction issues are non-divisive, if it is so easy to blame the government in power for not doing enough in the field of mental health. Not a single committee member however has publicly complained about the current government's lack of commitment to the issue. In order to try understanding this, let us draw some parallels by considering the Select Committee on Education (SCE) from twenty years ago.

SCE was struck by the Liberal government in 1988 in order to provide policy advice to the Premier regarding the role of the formal elementary and secondary school system. Similar to the current Select Committee, its members were chosen primarily due to a particular expertise and interest in the subject. Three first reports produced by this committee were all consensus ones that took unusually little time to agree on. It was known for some time as a surprisingly non-partisan committee that seemed to be able to "rise above the political process" (Schwenger 1990). Similar to today's Select Committee, Liberal chair as well as backbenchers (who belonged to the government at

the time) put some great efforts into convincing the opposition to take non-partisan approach and work towards the unanimous final report.

Despite the committee's success and excellent reputation in the first stages, its tri-partisan atmosphere started plummeting when the turn came to agree on the final report. It became evident that the opposition did enter the committee with the established party positions, especially regarding early childhood education. Liberal backbenchers however had viewed the committee as an opportunity to listen and learn and seemed to have no official directions from above. Schwenger concluded that it was rather lack of policy directions rather than true non-partisanship that dominated among the Liberal members of the committee (Schwenger 1990).

Now let us get back at our Mental Health and Addictions. Leaning on the example of the earlier SCE, one might start wondering if this magical harmony stems, at least partially, from the lack of policy direction from all sides of the political spectrum. All three parties had a chance to be in government for the past twenty years, however, none would be confident enough to step up and claim that their policies have made or are making the Ontario mental health system work. Thus, part of the success of the Mental Health and Addictions Committee might be accounted for common understanding that one government could not be blamed. For example, if the official opposition tried to hold current government responsible for the dysfunctional system, Liberal backbenchers on the Committee could be quick to remind them about some former government's slips. Bas Balkisoon, a Liberal MPP for Scarborough - Rouge River, was trying to keep his emotions under control during the interview when remembering how under the Progressive Conservative government of the mid '90s the branches of the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health were shut down and their patients let out into community for faster integration. The result of this initiative was that mentally ill were never properly accommodated in their community, but rather left panhandling on the streets (Balkisoon 2010).

It is not just politicians who have historically been ignorant to the mental health and addictions issues. We as a society were as well. Kevin Flynn for example thinks that it is society that has been giving permission to the government to overlook this important issue and therefore fail to provide adequate care and let stigma flourish. "The long silence on these issues might not be all that surprising if remembered that we as a society are historically used to avoiding even talking about mental health issues. It was not only the government that has been ignorant for such a long time, but society has also allowed us to be so," pointed out Kevin Flynn. He treats the committee not only as a great success for both parliament and executive branch, but also as a product of its time. The committee not only reflects changing social views, but it has a significant potential through wide public consultations to make our society even more accepting and ready to talk about touchy, almost taboo in the past, issues (Flynn 2010).

Select committee – too self-selective?

The committee is so effective and has such a positive image because its members are genuinely trying to understand what went wrong and how to fix it, not focusing on assigning blame to a particular government. It is fair to assume that it is not only the non-partisan and emotional issue that make the committee so well functioning, but also the specific people that are on the committee. Helena Jaczek, MPP for Oak Ridges Markham,

noted that: “Mental health committee is almost self-selective. It is composed of people who specifically asked to be on it, who have a personal or professional connection to the issue and those who know that the system is falling apart and something is to be done immediately.” Jaczek, who is a physician by profession and a former medical chief officer of York region, approached the Health Minister and asked to be on the committee (Jaczek 2010). Bas Balkisoon, in addition to being a Parliamentary Assistant to the Ministry of Health, observed a friend suffering from mental illness and therefore had a very personal interest in participating. An MPP for Guelph for example has an extensive background in education as school board trustee and a president of the school board association representing all public boards in Ontario. She had a lot of experience with children and youth mental issues. Jeff Leal, a Liberal member from Peterborough, serves as a Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and therefore is well familiar with some specific mental health and addictions issues facing Aboriginal communities.

Christine Elliott, the very same MPP who brought in a motion, initially had a very specific interest as a lawyer. In her riding of Whitby, she has had numerous constituents coming in and complaining about inability to receive mental health treatment for their children due to restrictions around the consent to treatment. “I really wanted to bring something forward that would fix that specific problem; however, later it occurred to me that it is such a difficult broad subject, a real political mind field where we are dealing with the individual liberty versus the idea that the person has the right to be well.” (Elliott 2010). Elliott realized that parliamentary expertise would only be a tiny fraction of what needed to be done in the area of mental health in Ontario. “I decided we should hear from the public that is involved in the mental system, be it a practitioner or a patient, and then try and change that system.” (Elliott 2010). One of the reasons why the mental health committee works so well is because everyone on the committee truly wants to be there and has some interest being its member.

Even though such dedications to these issues help to ensure a great level cooperation and high-quality expertise, it might even be seen as too self-selective. Once the time comes to present the recommendations in the legislature, members outside of the committee might even have a difficult time understanding and relating to the sophisticated discussion that has been taking place in the Select Committee. This becomes especially evident when a substitute MPP happens to sit (it should be emphasized that it happens rarely in this committee) on Mental Health. “Sometimes they just come in and start throwing around their memorized partisan commentaries. They just have no clue what we are doing around here!” exclaimed Helena Jaczek. Thus, it seems that the committee members should not only be coming up with recommendations, but educating their peers around Queen’s Park!

What is next after the report?

France Gélinas is confident that the first effect that the Committee will have is it will raise expectations to the way mental health should be managed in Ontario. She firmly believes that the government will look at the final report seriously and take necessary measures to implement members’ recommendations. “Otherwise, why would it even bother funding it?” (Gélinas 2010). Bas Balkisoon is less optimistic and expects any changes only if they are affordable for the government and part of its agenda (2010).

Sylvia Jones has also expressed a note of scepticism. “The Committee has been extremely cooperative and effective so far, but again I am stressing that we are not finished yet. Party lines might show up once final recommendations are to be made. Having said that, I do remain optimistic and I believe we will reach the unanimous report.” (Jones 2010) Christine Elliott also agrees that now committee is getting to the tough part of the job – final report – figuring what it all means and what could be realistically done. “We need to come up with something concrete for people who are counting on us. I do not want (along with all other MPPs) to see this as another exercise in public relations.” (Elliott 2010)

Despite all the success, it is absolutely justifiable to leave some space for pessimism as select committees do not direct change; they simply provide recommendations (Jones 2010). Even though all the interviewed MPPs, especially the opposition, wish committees were more powerful, they seem to agree with or at least accept the fact that committees of the Westminster system are not designed as policy-making bodies.

Some MPPs hope that after the report they would be hope to do more of the select committee work. Christine Elliott believes that they are an invaluable resource that is underused by the government. There is a million benefits to this type of work as opposed to heckling across the floor in the Question Period or searching for loopholes to get out of a clause-by-clause standing committee hearing. Ms. Elliott confessed that the type of the select committee activities that is currently happening might one of those rare chances to actually get to know fellow MPPs. “The better you know and understand your colleagues and have a personal connection to them, the less likely you are to hurl insults across the floor,” says Elliott. “Because we are so separated into caucuses, we don’t really have a chance to get to know each other and engage in personal conversations as we do in this committee” (Elliott 2010).

Conclusion

When members of the Ontario Legislative Assembly are asked to evaluate the committee work in comparison with the Chamber debates, they agree unanimously that partisan heckling across the Legislative floor cannot even compare itself to the truly productive work happening in the committees. Interestingly, when standing and select legislative committees are contrasted, most of the former ones become “a mere extension of the House” (Jones 2010). If the select committee work is so well respected, why not try having more of them functioning. Christine Elliott argued persuasively that the reason lies in the government inability to give up its decision-making power (Elliott). It was mentioned in the beginning that historically select committees were considered to be more powerful. And why wouldn’t they? These types of committees have the power of producing a tight group of dedicated experts on a specific issue, whose opinions would be hard to ignore, especially if everyone is speaking with one voice. At the end of the day, the government wants to remain in charge of major decision and not depend too much on tri-party committees. “So if the government does decide to set up a special investigative committee, it makes sure very carefully that the issue is truly non-partisan,” pointed out Ms. Elliott. Mental health and addictions issue seems to be working just according to the plan so far - there is no single government to blame for the disastrous mental health care system in Ontario. In fact, not only past and present governments should responsible for

such failure, but we as a society, used to sweeping these types of issues under the rug, should

We will just have to wait a little bit to see if the sense of common responsibility withstands once the Select Mental Health and Addictions Committee is due to make concrete recommendations and allocate resources.

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