

THE COMMONERS

CONTINUING THE GENERALIST VS. SPECIALIST DEBATE:

Exploring the Relationship between Past Experience and PA and Critic Portfolio Assignments in the Ontario Legislature

INTRODUCTION

Abstract

Parliamentary Assistants (PA) and opposition critics, play an important role in the democratic process of informing decision making and holding cabinet ministers to account. These elected officials are strategically chosen to advance the reputation and deepen the conversation about the complexities of their respective portfolios. Although these members are selected from among their colleagues, with the assumption that they are the most qualified to represent a particular interest group, what makes this so?

Research Questions

To what extent does one's academic, professional or personal background play, in determining their critic or PA posting? Are subject matter experts more qualified to champion an issue than an individual who possesses an unmatched level of process knowledge and political acuity? Finally, does this correlation between background and position result in better public policy?

Thesis

This paper will argue that although a strong correlation between member's past experience and their assigned PA or critic portfolio, seems to suggest better policy outcomes, only a **balanced** specialist and generalist approach, consisting of both **subject matter expertise** and **process knowledge** can result in robust public policy.

Methodology

Literature Review – Employed to explore:

1. Historical establishment of the position of PA and critic
2. Their relationships with other members of the legislature
3. Frequency of cabinet shuffles over time

10 MPP Interviews – Stratified Sample Selection Considered:

1. Level of Experience: New, experienced and senior members (party decision makers/ premiers)
2. Range of Portfolio Possession: First and only, multiple or numerous PA, critic or ministerial roles
3. Representation of Political Parties

Interview Questions

1. What specific skills relating to process knowledge or an understanding of the machinery of government, do you believe you gained from your past role?
2. In your past roles, what specific subject matter expertise do you believe you were able to gain?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do you believe you were able to draw upon your past experience for your political role?
4. How has your past personal or professional background helped or hindered your work?
5. What considerations do you believe go into the pairing of members with cabinet, PA and Critic portfolios? Does a party's position as government or opposition influence these considerations?
6. In your opinion, what is the most necessary skill for a PA or critic to possess to support or influence robust public policy?

ANALYSIS

Key Elements of Thesis

- **Representation of Identity and Experience Playing Greater Importance in Mainstream Politics** - The importance of representation is entering mainstream political discussions due to changing multicultural makeup of our cities and provinces. While we can assume legislators who self identify with these specific portfolios would be more effective leaders we must unpacking the specific characteristics that make them more or less qualified.
- **Cabinet Shuffles are Frequent Occurrences in Westminster Style Legislature** - In the study, *The Timing of Cabinet Reshuffles in Five Westminster Parliamentary Systems*, researchers Christopher Kam and Indridi Indridason found that systematic and time-varying causes were the main reasons for cabinet shuffles (Kam et al., 2005). Using repeated-events duration models for the period of 1960-2001, they found that cabinets in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand were reshuffled on average, every eleven months (Kam et al., 2005).
- **PAs and Critics Play an Important Role** - Advisory roles to a minister can be found at all levels of Westminster style parliaments through Parliamentary Assistants (PA) – provincially; Parliamentary Secretaries (PS) – federally and Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPS) – in the British executive (Johnston, 2018). They are appointed to provide specialized assistance for ministers in charge of major departments (Ontario, 1970).

Cabinet Material

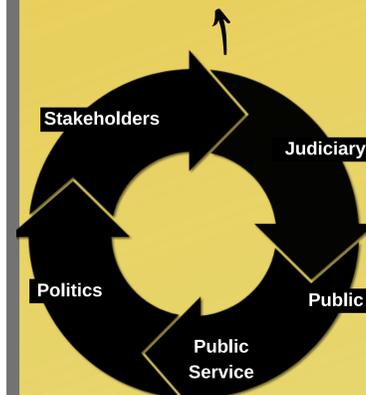
- Past Experience is Rarely a Consideration in Cabinet Appointment
- Considerations do not Differ Depending on Position as Government or Opposition
- Controversial appointments
- Critics that turn into Ministers

Key Skills

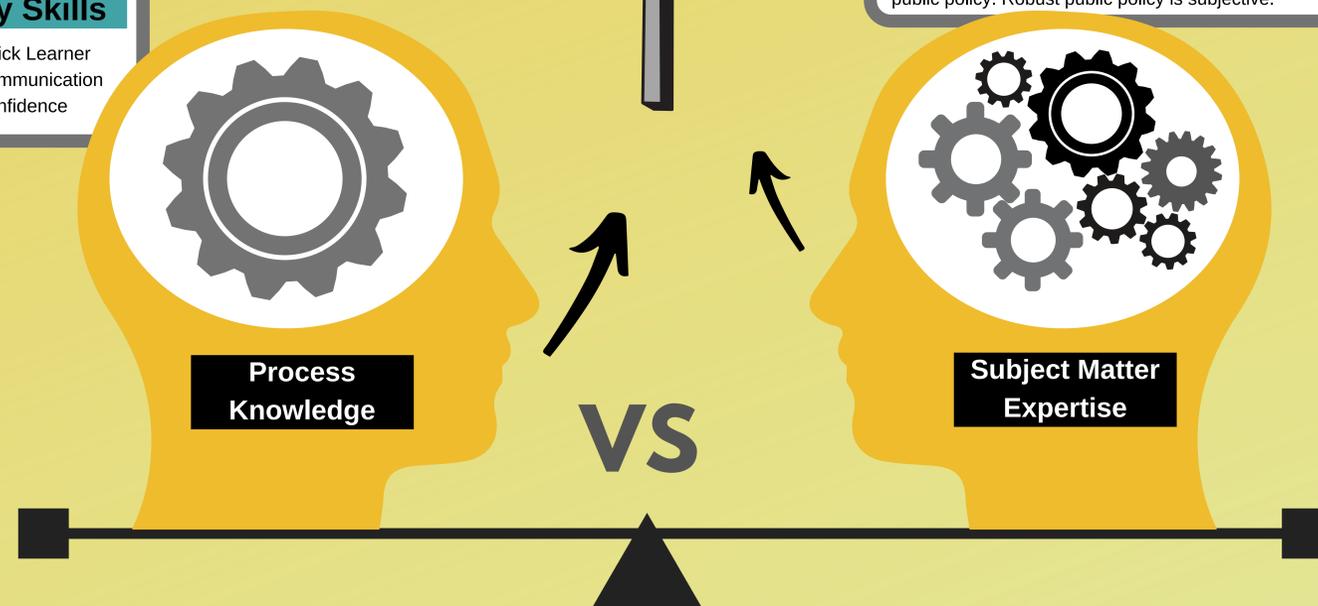
- Quick Learner
- Communication
- Confidence



Policy Outcomes



Policy Making is NOT Linear



Balanced Approach is Necessary

- **Subject Matter Expertise Can Undermine Evidence Based Decision Making** - When a member enters a role with inherent biases, misguided decision making can occur because these biases can undermine fact based decision making. The second major flaw with these pairings is that it is not a clean slate from a stakeholder perspective. Focusing on the bottom line or maintaining the status quo may get in the way of making merited change and improvements.
- **Pre-established Stakeholder Relationships can interfere with New Policy Ideas** - One former primer was apprehensive to pair members with portfolios closely related to their past experience to not risk interfering with policy outcomes. Inherent biases may exist by having past thoughts, advocacy and advice guide future decision making and voting. A new member is not beholden to a particular interest group and can guide with independent thought.
- **Role of PA and Critic Prioritizes Parliamentary Duties over Policy Development** – A PAs role is to assist the cabinet minister with their parliamentary duties, including speaking to relevant bills, introducing legislation in standing committees, attending stakeholder meetings and events on the minister's behalf, and providing ministerial oversight (Johnston, 2018). It is not the duty nor is it systematically possible for a PA or critic to assist in policy development, rather their roles remain legislative in nature.
- **Past Experience Helps Establish Values and Polity Priorities** – Many senior members revealed that the extent to which they were able to draw from their former roles was quite insignificant. Formal experience in a particular industry only helps you establish your values, and areas of interest, once these determined, they help guide decision making and form your views, which in time, will also change.

What is Robust Public Policy?

The push and pull between a number of political actors including internal and external stakeholders in combination with an individual member's personal contributions result in public policy. Robust public policy is subjective.

FINDINGS

Most Necessary Skills

One former Liberal Premier, who previously spent a number of years in opposition, said that an effective critic is one who is able to contemplate and wrestle with ideas. Additionally, one long serving critic stated that people do not come here understanding how it all works, and that perhaps is the intent. Everyone is capable of learning the technical applications such as how the standing orders work and how to draft legislation. He asserted that the nature of this place is that it is the house of commoners. Anyone from any background can come and have their voice heard. It is necessary to have a diverse group of people with varied skills and experiences. Having a homogenous group of lawyers and career public servants one small aspect of the diverse set of skills that are necessary. This diversity is necessary because members make decisions on all policies and therefore must be open to hearing all viewpoints.

Competency & Communication

Competency relates to an individual's work ethic, willingness to learn and ability to do the necessary research on a topic they have little expertise in. **Communication** related to one's ability to synthesize a complex issue and effectively distill information into accessible themes for the general public. **Competency and communication** allow PAs and critics to articulate their message, connect with people, garner support for the issue and advance the reputation of their portfolio.

Limitations to Representation

Advocacy can only go so far as being able to listen to and share the voices and perspectives of the key members of the public, your proposed policies affect. Regardless of if an indigenous person was in at cabinet to represent that portfolio, which does not inherently guarantee that they will be better for the job. One can not isolate for their professional or personal background being the determining factor as to why they are successful or not. This could be for a number of different reasons separate from experience.

Conclusion

What can be concluded from the various PA, critic and Premier interviews conducted, is that subject matter expertise actually have very little influence on ones portfolio assignment. In fact the underlying finding is that inherit bias present with this correlation cannot be assertively negated. The only advantage, formalized years of experience, personally or professionally can give a member - are transferable skills that they can use in their new role as a public office holder. Process knowledge on the other hand does not necessarily make one individual better at their job as these things can be taught and learned along the way. In order for a PA or critic to be successful in their role, they must develop two transferable skills; communication and competency. Harnessing these skills can result in not only the success of members to climb the political ladder in garnering attention, respect and deeper portfolio assignment but it also can help further analysis and discussion on policy, perhaps leading to better public policy.