

“ ‘Dangerous Liaisons?’ : A Survey of MPP Liaisons at Queen’s Park.”

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## INTRODUCTION

As a Legislative Intern at Queen's Park, I had the chance to experience life as a political staffer on both government and opposition parties. While the Liberal and Conservative parties have their respective caucus research bureaus and party machineries, one point of access to government information is similar: MPP Liaisons. The distribution of this list of individuals is surely a hotly anticipated event, for it is these individuals to whom Members of Parliament of all parties send their inquiries to Ministers on behalf of their constituents. Surely, these Liaisons are pivotal portals for helping Members of Provincial Parliament do their job.

In this paper, I survey these essential political staff to ascertain a sense of who these people are and what capacity they affect the day to day work of MPPs at Queen's Park. Through interviews with current and former MPP Liaisons (from both the Liberal and Conservative governments), as well as other expert observers from Queen's Park, I will examine the evolution of the position, what being an MPP Liaison entails, and whether MPP Liaisons share common experiences. Further, I will explore the relationship between MPP Liaisons and backbench Members of the Ontario Legislature on both government and opposition sides. Finally, I will evaluate the effectiveness of MPP Liaisons as an access point for all Members of Parliament, insofar as they assist all Members to realize their role as elected representatives of their constituents.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

I conducted 8 interviews with current MPP Liaisons (see Appendix 1):

Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving (since the 2007 election)

Liaison 2: Liberal, long serving (since before the 2007 election)

Liaison 3: Liberal, long serving

Liaison 4: Liberal, short serving

Liaison 5: Liberal, short serving

Liaison 6: Liberal, long serving

Liaison 7: Liberal, long serving

Liaison 8: Liberal, short serving

As well as drawing on many informal conversations with MPPs and political staff of all parties, I also interviewed two other significant people for this paper:

Member 1 : Conservative, long serving, Critic

Staff 1: Legislative Intern, Opposition Party Placement

## THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

I personally contacted every MPP Liaison with a request to participate in the interview. I was able to interview 7 of a total of 28 Ministries (just over 25%). Overall, response to my interview request was favourable, having received responses from almost half of the total MPP Liaisons at Queen's Park. Before each session, I briefed the interviewee about the purpose of this paper and guaranteed anonymity upon participating

in the interview process. All interviews took place in a mutually agreed up on place, usually either in the Liaison's office in the Ministry or in the Legislature cafeteria. For all the interviews, there was no third party present.

After each interview, my analysis began by transcribing the interviews either from written hand notes or from a tape recorder. As my research continued, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the MPP Liaison. I categorize my findings as follows: first, I examine where the MPP Liaison staff position is situated in the Minister's office; second, I summarize their political background and experience; third I survey their primary responsibilities in order to ascertain if it is constant across Ministries; finally, I examine the relationship of the MPP Liaison to Members of Parliament at Queen's Park and their staff.

## MPP LIAISONS: BACKGROUND

Over the past several months, I have come to interpret the role of the MPP Liaison as the bridge between MPPs and the Ministry. MPP Liaisons are expected to respond to MPPs, their Queen's Park and constituency staff quickly and efficiently, by providing information or counsel on the issue at hand. It wasn't until I had to send an inquiry to an MPP Liaison myself that I started to wonder who these people were, and in what way do they fit into the political staff structure and hierarchy at Queen's Park. What I found out was that much to my surprise, these individuals who work in Ministers' offices, who are intended to aid all MPPs at Queen's Park do their job efficiently, are in fact all members of the governing party. I could not help but wonder what the implications were of a politicized position, such as an MPP Liaison, as a common source of information for backbench Members of Parliament.

The MPP Liaison position is unique to Ministries at Queen's Park. I was unable to find the same staff position in other Provincial jurisdictions in Canada; however, it may well be that similar positions exist under a different title. The challenge to investigating a political position in a Ministers office is that the staff is generally not very forthcoming with information regarding the organization or hierarchy of the workplace. Exploiting the my internship connections to their maximum potential, I was able to speak with some staffers in at least one other Province<sup>1</sup> who assured me that there was no such thing as an "MPP Liaison", and that for the most part, inquiries from MPPs or Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) were directed to the Minister's Executive Assistant.

Prior to the advent of Liaisons in Ministers' offices, when Members required information from the Ministry (regardless of their party), they contacted the Minister's Executive Assistant, as is the case in other Provinces. According to a long-serving Progressive Conservative (PC) Member, the MPP Liaison staff position was created under the Harris government in the mid-1990s; "without exception," this Member recalls, "MPP Liaisons were volunteers...[the MPP Liaison] and Chief of Staff roles evolved to be political positions."<sup>2</sup> Now, MPP Liaisons are a part of a Minister's staff, meaning they are party-affiliated individuals as members of the governing party. Typically,

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<sup>1</sup> Staff 1. Telephone Interview. 13 May. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Member 1. In-Person Interview. 2 April. 2008.

although not always, a Minister's staff will consist of a Chief of Staff, a handful of Policy Analysts and Communications staff. Every Ministry, no matter the size, also has an MPP Liaison.

Ideally, as one Member suggests<sup>3</sup>, the individual who fills the Liaison position will have good contacts in the bureaucracy, who are instructed to limit their interaction with MPPs. More often than not, however, there is a lot of turnover in the Liaison position, and these crucial links between Members and Ministers are young, inexperienced and relatively new political staff.

#### POLITICAL BACKGROUND AND LENGTH OF TENURE

All Liaisons interviewed, with the exception of one, had some prior involvement with the Liberal Party. More often than not that involvement was at the Provincial level, but there were cases where staff from a federal Liberal Member of Parliament (MP) took a position as MPP Liaison in a Provincial MPP's office.

MPP Liaisons described their involvement prior to working in their position varied from always having been engaged in politics in some capacity to previously holding positions in a political office. Many of the younger Liaisons were involved in student government in University or with the Young Liberal Party.<sup>4</sup> Others were frequent volunteers on a local MPP's campaign either on the last Provincial election or one prior.

Most Liaisons have worked for either federal MP's or Provincial MPP's prior to taking on Liaison responsibilities. Of those who worked for federal or provincial Members, it was typically in the Member's constituency office. A Liaison's experience in dealing with stakeholders and individuals in the constituency appears to have a reciprocal relationship with their appeal to and skill at the Liaison position. Several Liaisons were drawn to their position because of the expectation of dealing with cases with Members' constituency offices, and one Liaison indicated that it was on the basis of her background in dealing with stakeholders and Members that the Minister hired her, because, "dealing like Members is like dealing with stakeholders...it was a natural progression [to being an MPP Liaison]."<sup>5</sup>

Of the MPP Liaisons I interviewed, just over half have been MPP Liaisons since the last Ontario election in the fall of 2007, while the remaining Liaisons have been in their position (or the same position in another Ministry) since at least 2005. There is one legendary Liaison who has been in the position since 2000. However, many of the new Liaisons, or those who have only been Liaisons since the fall of 2007, worked in political offices prior.

A key motivating factor for taking the position is the potential for mobility in either a Minister's office or other senior positions in government. The breadth of Liaisons' responsibilities is extensive, but as most Liaisons indicated, the "job is what [you] make of it."<sup>6</sup> Thus, I found that several MPP Liaisons committed to the position with the expectation that they would move on to a more senior position in a few years.

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<sup>3</sup> Member 1: In-Person Interview. 2 April. 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Liaison 2: Liberal, long serving, Liaison 5: Liberal, short serving.

<sup>5</sup> Liaison 2: Liberal, long serving

<sup>6</sup> Liaison 7: Liberal, long serving

## PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES

As an intern in with an opposition MPP, I interpreted the Liaison role as someone non-political who acted as a link between the bureaucracy and Members of Parliament. My assumption was challenged when I began my placement with the government, as I realized that there is much more to being an MPP Liaison than providing information about government programs and services to Members of the Legislature.

Typically, MPP Liaisons perform two duties simultaneously: Caucus Outreach and MPP Liaison. Generally, 'Caucus Outreach' encompasses some issues management, some communications (political messaging on particular issues), some policy planning and coordination of the Minister's announcements and tours with other MPPs of the governing party. And although MPP Liaisons confirmed that duties can vary from Ministry to Ministry, "the Liaison part [of the job] is constant across the whole board."<sup>7</sup> These Liaison duties include responding to MPP inquiries pertinent to their Ministry, communicating with the bureaucracy regarding specific cases in a Member's riding, and troubleshooting with Ministry programs.

As Liaison 1 points out, duties vary from Liaison to Liaison.<sup>8</sup> Liaison 2 says that in her office there are two MPP Liaisons, which is not uncommon: "one colleague [will deal with] the ad hoc cases and casework, while [I] do a lot of issue briefings, give advice on the media and how to shape what each Member says, tailoring the message, policy work and trying to help Members introduce Private Members Bills." First I will explore the 'Caucus Relations' of MPP Liaisons and in the next section I will address in more depth the Liaison responsibilities and interaction with Members and their staff.

As mentioned, 'Caucus Relations' includes helping Members of their party with political messaging on particular issues, helping with communications plans for Ministry policies and programs, and co-coordinating Ministers' visits to other Members' ridings. However, much of the political work of an MPP Liaison is more nuanced. Liaison 7 offered a more detailed glimpse into the political aspect of her position:

"People think that the MPP Liaison job is, 'Oh, how do I get funding for this organization'", and it is and there needs to be someone here who is looping the MPPs in, but it's more than that. It's ensuring that we are as political as we can be in [X] file relating to Members so when we go out, they know about it."<sup>9</sup>

Liaison 8 also commented on the political aspect of the position: "Caucus relations is more political and you have to have a political awareness of 'what is the impact of this?' and 'will this get the Member re-elected in 4 years?'"

Two Liaisons describe, "protecting the Minister" as one of their responsibilities. On the one hand, says Liaison 4, you act as a "punching bag" for the Minister, meaning that you take the political 'hits' first, either from outside stakeholders or from other

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<sup>7</sup> Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving

<sup>8</sup> Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving

<sup>9</sup> Liaison 6: Liberal, long serving

MPPs.<sup>10</sup> Also, Liaison 6 considers “protecting the Minister” as a defence from criticism outside the Ministry, but also protection from their own Caucus:

“it’s not, ‘oh yea that’s a Liberal group in your riding, let’s give them a ton of cash’, it’s not. There’s an internal politics [within the party] that is something you need to maneuver around as well, and....being able to deal with that in a way to protect the Minister is an important part of the job as well...but to the outside world I answer the phone to the MPPs.”<sup>11</sup>

That same Liaison stressed the importance of her position in maintaining political continuity between the Minister as a Minister, and the Minister as a Member of Provincial Parliament, because after all, Ministers are elected representatives of the people of Ontario. At times, Liaison 6 explains, the MPP Liaison’s position is a balancing act between contributing to the Minister’s office ability to coordinate Ministry priorities and programs with the Caucus and simultaneously being politically savvy with issues in the Minister’s riding:

“...this job is supposed to be outreach to the Members but it’s also supposed to be the political person.... So you need someone who works at Queen’s Park who can assist the local office in the kind of stuff – bigger picture, high level – all kinds of issues that are big boy issues that need to be dealt with around here....it’s very tough because you’re doing two full time jobs. One of them you’re kind of made to feel kind of guilty because it’s a political job, but it’s a necessary part of the game. Everyone’s who’s in this role, there’s that understanding and expectation that they’re the political point person on everything, you know, the fundraising that occurs, all that kind of stuff.... we’re political staffers, we’re not bureaucrats. We got here because we fought an election, either for the person we’re working for or another. We’re here because of our ideology, we’re here because we’re Liberal. And we won’t be here if we’re not winning the next election, that’s the reality. While politics is good government and policy, it’s still politics. And sometimes, Ministers’ offices don’t have that grasp or that connection or that understanding because we’re only here because people voted us here and we’re political.”<sup>12</sup>

Liaison 5 also pointed out this balancing act between Caucus Outreach and MPP Liaison responsibilities. “It’s hard to separate my Liaison and Caucus Outreach duties,” L5 says. “It’s hard to stay non-partisan.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a large part of the day-to-day work of an MPP Liaison fulfills a political purpose as Caucus Outreach: notifying MPPs of riding visits, being a champion of local interests and

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<sup>10</sup> Liaison 4: Liberal, short serving

<sup>11</sup> Liaison 6: Liberal, long serving

<sup>12</sup> Liaison 6: Liberal, long serving

<sup>13</sup> Liaison 5: Liberal, short serving

reinforcing the local MPP by paying attention to their input regarding the riding. The other important component of being an MPP Liaison is in their interaction with MPP's Queen's Park and Constituency Office staff, and I will explore this relationship in the following section.

#### LIAISON DUTIES: INTERACTION WITH MEMBERS AND STAFF

As mentioned above, the governing party provides Opposition MPPs with a list of MPP Liaisons for inquiries regarding government programs, policies and troubleshooting. For resource-strapped backbenchers, the information these point people provide is crucial to responding to constituent correspondence and to help constituents overcome barriers to information or access to the government. Regardless of party stripe, all elected MPPs act fulfill a representational role by voicing the community's issues in the Provincial arena.

It is no surprise, then, that MPP Liaisons are "contacted on a fairly regular basis"<sup>14</sup> from opposition Members. The frequency of contact varied between Ministries, ranging anywhere from "about a 50/50"<sup>15</sup> split between contact from government and opposition, to a "significantly or disproportionately higher percentage of calls from Liberal members, [but also] a fairly high number of calls from the Conservatives...and a couple of calls from the NDP."<sup>16</sup>

MPP Liaisons overall claimed to respond to inquiries from all parties in a fair and equitable way. Most inquiries to Liaisons come from MPPs' constituency offices rather than Queen's Park offices, although it depends on how the Member's office is structured. As constituency offices tend to interact with constituents on a more regular basis, Liaisons felt that "there is a non-partisan aspect to Constituency offices"<sup>17</sup> and that they had an important non-partisan role to play in helping the Member's constituency staff communicate the appropriate information to constituents. As one Liaison said, "...when it comes to [constituency] staff calling, they all have the same basic concerns. They just want to deal with a particular case. There's no larger political agenda."<sup>18</sup> Another Liaison, Liaison 7, elaborates:

"...every Member, no matter their party [will call in]...all 107 offices, and they're all treated the same. I don't respond to Liberals first and Tories last – it's sort of the ease of the question and the order they come in....All parties, any question they ask, I find the answer. The way I phrase the

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<sup>14</sup> Liaison 3: Liberal, long serving

<sup>15</sup> Liaison 5: Liberal, short serving

<sup>16</sup> Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving

<sup>17</sup> Liaison 8: Liberal, short serving

<sup>18</sup> Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving

answer might be a little different, because I know that an opposition Member is not going to talk about how great we are as a government, they're going to just give the facts."<sup>19</sup>

Liaison 1 confirms this view:

"...there are certain things that Conservatives don't expect me to be able to help them with, because there's the whole political relationship with the staff. So, you know, to think if they wanted a political favour that would be difficult. But when it comes to information and case issues, it tends to be fairly similar how I deal with the Conservatives or how I deal with the Liberals."<sup>20</sup>

When asked to describe his/her relationship with the opposition parties, Liaison 2 describes the association as,

"A basic, functional role. They don't come to you for policy advocate work; they go to the library research instead. They [ask] more functional questions to help guide them to the appropriate piece of information....No question goes unanswered....but obviously you provide a bit more for Members of your own party."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, although he/she denies they are encouraged to 'spin' or 'politicize' information they provide to opposition MPPs, Liaison 5 says that information given to opposition offices is on a "need to know basis" and "[you] don't offer any more information than you need to."<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, Liaisons pointed out that the interaction between them and an opposition MPP or their staff is inevitably politicized. Although most Liaisons claimed there was equality to the information they provided to Members' inquiries, one Liaison did reveal that "[you] have to be careful on what information you're providing...there has to be an *appearance* of equality of access to the Minister."<sup>23</sup> This statement confirms my assumption that having an MPP liaison in a Minister's office that fulfills at once an important partisan link between the Minister and the caucus, as well as a non-partisan provider of information, is conflictual.

I asked Liaisons to describe their relationship with the opposition parties, and although the answer was generally that the relationship was positive, or neutral at the very least, there were still political sensitivities. Liaisons point to examples where inquiries from opposition offices are carefully crafted to serve a political purpose:

"Opposition members don't use the MPP liaison because then it limits their ability to do something in the House....the opposition members will

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<sup>19</sup> Liaison 7: Liberal, long serving

<sup>20</sup> Liberal 1: Liberal, short serving

<sup>21</sup> Liaison 2: Liberal, long serving

<sup>22</sup> Liaison 5: Liberal, short serving

<sup>23</sup> Liaison 4: Liberal, short serving



write letters about their issue, but don't ask for specific information because having that information means they might have to act on it.”<sup>24</sup>

Liaison 6 uses another example:

“Some opposition Members call about something they already know and I can tell it's a setup – a document that they know the Minsitry won't release and they don't release, so I have to be careful in my responses, because a week later I'll get a [request under the Freedom of Information Act].”<sup>25</sup>

Liaison 8 found it helpful to communicate strategically to opposition Members' in the early stages of the inquiry in order to establish a good rapport with the office and avoid conflict later: “ Opposition Members [and the staff at their Queen's Park office] are more strategic in their information requests...they pose questions for ammunition in the House [for question period]”<sup>26</sup>. Thus, this Liaison found it extremely valuable to respond to opposition inquiries as quickly and efficiently as possible, in order to avoid giving the impression that they (the Liaison) is unreliable, unreachable and unhelpful. This particular Liaison recognized that ultimately they are there to help the MPP access information from their Ministry regardless of party stripe.

Given the importance of the Caucus Outreach responsibility on top of the Liaison role, there is reason to infer that the Liaison is more effective as a link between MPP and Ministry with Members of their own party. However, as Hepburn's research<sup>27</sup> has illustrated, the quality of a Member or staff's experience with an MPP Liaison is not solely dependent on party affiliation, and the degree of Members' satisfaction with a Liaison varied greatly. Hepburn found that there was indeed a wide range in the degree to which MPP Liaisons were able to facilitate an effective relationship between the Ministry and the MPP and their staff.

At worst, Members' experience with an MPP Liaison was “poor to unsatisfactory”<sup>28</sup> to “horrible and useless”<sup>29</sup>. Another Member expanded on these sentiments: “I'd rather cut off my arm than deal with an MPP Liaison. They don't respond in time. They don't have the information...There's no point in calling at all. I'd rather just open my phone book and contact any bureaucrat.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, some members have described MPP Liaisons as “very helpful” and “much needed to all

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<sup>24</sup> Liaison 1: Liberal, short serving. The Liaison is alluding to the idea that opposition MPPs do not want to be 'pigeonholed' into utilizing government services and information.

<sup>25</sup> Liaison 6: Liberal, long serving

<sup>26</sup> Liaison 8: Liberal, short serving

<sup>27</sup> Hepburn, Nicola. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns: Exploring the Relationship between the Constituency Office, the Backbench MPP and the Bureaucracy.”

<sup>28</sup> Conservative long-term Member 5, quoted in Hepburn, N. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns.” p. 16

<sup>29</sup> Conservative long-term Member 7, quoted in Hepburn, N. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns.” p. 17

<sup>30</sup> Conservative Constit 10, quoted in Hepburn, N. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns.” p. 17

offices”<sup>31</sup>; MPP Liaisons are also seen to be “relatively good but unfortunately inconsistent from Ministry to Ministry”<sup>32</sup>

In the end, the purpose of an MPP Liaison is to act as the go-between MPPs and the Ministry and to aid Members, and their staff, to effectively respond to inquiries from constituents and facilitate the Member’s responsibility as a representative of the people they serve in their riding. When Members and staff have a good experience with a Liaison – their phone calls are returned promptly, their inquiries are pursued in some detail – it greatly helps a an MPP be an effective link for communicating the wishes and concerns of their constituents. However, when an MPP or staff Member has a mediocre to bad experience with a Liaison, they are left disappointed and their ability to be an effective channel of communication for their constituents is hindered.

## CONCLUSION

Interviewing several MPP Liaisons at Queen’s Park has without a doubt given me a more comprehensive understanding of this important link between MPPs and Ministries, and their ability to affect an MPP’s capacity to be an effective channel of communication for their constituents at Queen’s Park. There is great diversity in the Liaisons, of varying ages, experience and expertise. Moreover, there is wide range of roles MPP Liaisons fulfill depending on the Ministry in which they work. Overall, MPP Liaisons are truly ‘jack of all trades’ when it comes to issues management, communications, event planning, research and policy.

At the end of the day, after surveying the MPP Liaisons at Queen’s Park, I could find one reason for them to perform both Caucus Outreach responsibilities for Members of their own party simultaneously as fulfilling a non-partisan liaison link between MPPs and the Ministry. Inevitably their purpose is political, and by having one person fulfill both of the above functions allows the party to monitor their Ministries and maintain the government’s agenda.

One major challenge for rendering MPP Liaisons more effective is the seniority of the position relative to other staff in the Minister’s office. Ideally, if the Liaison is to be the access point for information and communications with the Ministry for backbench MPPs, that individual should know the Ministry well and be able to get back with the information you need quickly. If the position is seen to be Junior, which is typically the case, the Liaison’s status is weakened and it obstructs MPPs’ ability to fill their representational role to their constituents. If, on the other hand, Liaisons earn more clout in the office, MPPs and their staff will likely utilize them more effectively.

Ultimately, the MPP Liaison position is ‘what you make of it’. The Liaisons I interviewed who had more political experience were quick to recognize that the more proactive they were in the Minister’s office, the more recognition and responsibility they would receive. Significantly, I can conclude that MPP Liaisons exercise a considerable degree of discretion and judgment when it comes to interacting with Members, especially

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<sup>31</sup> Liberal Constit 3, quoted in Hepburn, N. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns.” p. 18

<sup>32</sup> Liberal short-term Parliamentary Assistant Member 9, quoted in Hepburn, N. “Backbench MPPs as Agents of Local Concerns.” p. 18

Members of other parties. In this respect, political experience counts in being perceived as a 'good' MPP Liaison, as they were the ones who realized the value in not alienating opposition Members when it comes to responding to inquiries. The Legislature is the forum for debate in which MPPs, whether backbench, Parliamentary Assistants or Ministers, are able to represent all constituents and can be the channel of communication. And there's no danger in that.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS A SURVEY OF MPP LIAISONS AT QUEEN'S PARK**

1. How long have you been an MPP Liaison? How long have you been working for this Ministry?
2. Tell me a bit about your political background.
3. How did you get this job?
4. Would you say that it is a well sought after position?

5. What about this position appealed to you when you found about its opening?
6. What kind of training was there for you when you started working as MPP Liaison? Did you feel it was sufficient?
7. What are the prospects or opportunities for mobility with this job? How long do you expect to be working as an MPP Liaison?
8. Describe your primary responsibilities. Was this what you expected when you started in this position?
9. Would you say that you respond to inquiries primarily from members/offices from your own party? How often do you receive inquiries from opposition parties?
10. What is your relationship with the opposition parties? Would you say that you are contacted as often as you expected to be, or less?
11. Are you encouraged to spin information when providing it to opposition members?
12. What other ways, besides contacting an MPP Liaison, could Members' offices gather the information you provide?
13. Do you feel like you are underutilized as a source of information for Members?

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