

# **Provincial-International Relations: Exploring the International Involvement of the Ontario Legislature**

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This paper seeks to explore the international involvement, or the international relations, of the Ontario Legislature. It will be shown that local parliamentarians, as exemplified by the involvement of the Ontario Legislature, have important roles to play internationally. Not only do provincial-international relations exist at the legislative level, but they occur quite frequently and in a diverse manner of ways. The paper will outline and describe such relations as they occur between the Ontario Legislature and foreign legislatures or other bodies, as exemplified through the Legislature's involvement in interparliamentary organizations and delegations, as well as through the pursuit of international initiatives advanced by members, Officers, and affiliates of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. In addition to describing the actions that have and are currently taking place, the paper will begin a discussion about the general purposes of such international relations at the provincial parliamentary level, as well as discuss their perceived effectiveness. It will be argued that these relations have distinct purposes, which have, in many cases, achieved positive results.

While literature on provincial-international legislative relations does exist, it is still remains quite sparse. However, the limited background that does exist on the matter nonetheless points to how frequently such relations occur, their significance, and even more so, how worthy they are of further exploration. Overall, this paper attempts to expand on the existing literature by providing an up-to-date account of the international involvement of provincial parliaments, using the Ontario Legislature as its case study. The paper will build on the existing literature by describing the Legislature's involvement in terms of its frequency and forms, as well as by continuing to build on the questions of purpose, importance, and effectiveness

## **Interparliamentary Organizations**

One of the main ways that the Ontario Legislature exercises its international involvement is through involvement in interparliamentary organizations or institutions. Interparliamentary organizations are essentially formal bodies set up to facilitate relations among parliamentarians of various legislatures. According to Sabic (2008: 258), interparliamentary institutions can be defined as “. . . institutions in which parliamentarians co-operate with a view to formulating their interests, adopting decisions, strategies, or programs, which they implement or promote, formally and informally in interactions with other actors . . .”. There are also various types of interparliamentary organizations, which bring together parliamentarians on different bases. For instance, many are regionally organized (i.e. the Midwestern Legislative conference), while others may bring together parliamentarians based on common characteristics (i.e. the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophone and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association).

The Ontario Legislature is a member of four interparliamentary organizations: the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), L'Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and the Council of State Governments (CSG) through both the Midwestern Legislature Conference (MLC) and the Eastern Legislative Conference (ELC). Each of these organizations will be described in turn, by outlining their structure, activities and aims. In addition, the particular involvement of the Ontario Legislature will be profiled.

## **Delegations**

A significant way that the Ontario Legislature exercises its international involvement is by hosting and sending international delegations. These delegations come in a variety of forms and are sent for a variety of purposes, but they generally act as forums for parliamentarians – comprised of staff and officials – from various parts of the world to get together (Anderson, interview, April 12 2010). It is important to note that the Ontario Legislature hosts far more delegations each year than it sends (Deller, interview, March 30 2010). Each year the Ontario Legislature receives around 40 to 50 delegations from a variety of international parliaments, while it sends only about 25 per year, if visits associated with interparliamentary organizations are accounted for (Anderson and LaMantia, interview, April 12, 2010). If such visits are not included, the number of parliamentary delegations sent abroad reduces to less than 10 (Anderson and LaMantia, interview, April 12, 2010).

As an example, listed below are the international delegations that the Ontario Legislature hosted in the fourth quarter of 2009 (October – December):

- Ghana
- Spain
- China (Chongqing)
- Consul General of Germany
- Ambassador of the Republic of Ecuador
- Nigeria
- Portugal
- Korea
- China (Shanghai)
- Nigeria (Imo)
- Vietnam
- Joint Canadian and American Clerks Conference

(John Anderson, interview, April 12 2010)

These delegations were comprised of members and/or officials, and meetings including MPP round table discussions and presentations, meeting with Commissioners of the Legislative Assembly (such as the Ombudsman, Auditor General, and Integrity Commissioner), as well as staff training, division tours, and job shadowing (John Anderson, interview, April 12 2010).

The delegations that the Ontario Legislature both sends and receives can be divided into three subtypes: (1) visits associated with interparliamentary organizations; (2) courtesy calls; and (3) working delegations.

### **Individual Initiatives**

While up until this point to focus has remained on more organized or formalized instances of international involvement, it is also important to look at more discretionary efforts that are exercised. Quite often members or officers of the Legislative Assembly begin initiatives of their own that are international in scope. These initiatives arise for various reasons – whether they be to respond to needs of a constituency, for instance, or to simply satisfy a personal interest – they nonetheless form a significant portion of the Legislature's international involvement and deserve examination. The efforts of former Speaker David Warner, NDP member France Gelinac, and NDP member Cheri DiNovo will be explored.

### **Affiliates of the Ontario Legislature**

Another component of the international relations of the Ontario Legislature involves the activities exercised by affiliates of the Ontario Legislature. A meaningful example in this regard is the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP). The Ontario Legislature Internship Programme was established in 1975 and is administered by the Canadian Political Science Association, as well as funded by a grant from the Ontario Legislature. Each year, the non-partisan programme gives ten interns the opportunity to work for backbench members of the Legislature. Each intern spends half a term working for a Government member, and the other half for a member of the Opposition. In addition to this practical component, the programme is also educational in nature. Through organized visits to other Legislatures, both within Canada and beyond, interns are given the opportunity to study the legislative process through a comparative lens.

The comparative component of the programme serves several important functions. First, the visits allow the ten interns, who are acting as delegates of the Ontario Legislature, to set up relations with individuals or groups internationally. Second, the visits provide an opportunity to see how the legislative process functions in other jurisdictions, providing an interesting comparison to the way things are done in Ontario. This can either reaffirm current practices, as well as provide a forum for questioning the rationale behind such practices and to deliberate on how they might be done in a more effective way.

### **Purposes and Effectiveness**

As was set out in the introductory remarks of this paper, after examining what the international relations of parliaments are and how they function, the question of purpose becomes a central issue in need of address. This section will seek to provide answers as to why and for what returns parliamentarians engage in international legislative relations.

It will be argued that these relations have distinct purposes, which have, in many cases, achieved substantial results.

After evaluating all of the research, the purposes of international legislative relations can be summed up in two overarching categories: (1) the sharing of information and practices; and (2) developing resolutions to common problems or policy issues.

The first category stresses the ability of international legislative relations to serve as vehicles for sharing knowledge and expertise among parliamentarians. International legislative relations point to something significant: parliaments do not exist in isolation. Rather, parliaments exist all across the world, and every parliament has a unique way of doing things. By engaging with parliaments from across the globe, parliamentarians are exposed to new, different, and sometimes better, ways of doing things. Engaging in comparisons provides an opportunity for the development of best practices, with the ultimate goal of improving the parliamentary process. An important component of this knowledge sharing process is assisting developing democracies, by contributing to efforts intended to strengthen the parliamentary process in these nations. However, benefits are experienced by all parliamentarians involved, suggesting that such international pursuits are very worthwhile.

The second purpose served by international legislative relations is the development of resolutions to common problems or policy issues. Often times the aims of international outreach is concerned less about sharing and learning, and more about formulating concrete policy results. The NCSL, for instance outlines policy innovation as one of its main aims. The CSG also stresses one of its main aims as being the formation of public policy, and explains that this proceeds through the exchange of information and ideas among legislators. Both Speaker Peters and Deborah Deller emphasize, for instance, the discussions about border travel that took place through the MLC. The examples explored show just how relations among international legislators can effectively lead to policy generation.

However, while international legislative relations are almost universally perceived as being useful and effective, they can be enhanced. The Ontario Legislature's involvement in such relations can be improved in certain aspects. Cheri DiNovo (interview, April 14 2010), for instance, believes that a reporting mechanism must be put in place at the Legislature to ensure that newly gained knowledge is adequately disseminated across members, Officers, and staff. Peters (interview, March 11 2010) points to another area for improvement. Peters would like to see some kind of formal twinning program be established between the Ontario Legislature and a developing democracy. Taking these considerations into account will almost certainly enhance the effectiveness of the international outreach of the Ontario Legislature.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this paper was to bridge a divide in academia between literature that focuses on international affairs and that which focuses on provincial politics at the legislative

level. The interaction between these two spheres was profiled by exploring the international involvement, or the international relations, of the Ontario Legislature. It was shown that local parliamentarians, as exemplified by the involvement of those at the Ontario Legislature, have important roles to play to play internationally. Not only do provincial-international relations exist at the legislative level, but they occur quite frequently and in a diverse manner of ways. The paper outlined and described such relations as they occur between the Ontario Legislature and foreign legislatures or other bodies. First, the involvement of the Ontario Legislature in interparliamentary organizations, being the CPA, APF, NCSL and CSG, was profiled. Second, the delegations that the Legislature both sends and receives were explored, including visits associated with interparliamentary organizations, courtesy calls and working delegations. And, finally, individual initiatives advanced by members and officers of the Legislative Assembly were outlined. Initiatives advanced by former speaker David Warner, as well as MPPs Frances Gelinis and Cheri DiNovo, were examined, and the comparative activities of the ten Ontario Legislative interns was profiled.

In addition to describing the actions that have and are currently taking place, the paper began a discussion about the general purposes of such international relations at the provincial parliamentary level, as well as discuss their perceived effectiveness. It was argued that these relations have distinct purposes, which have, in many cases, achieved positive results. The purposes served by international legislative relations were divided into two types: (1) the sharing of ideas and practices; and (2) the development of resolutions to common problems and policy issues. While the former has led to the improvement of practices and the parliamentary process as a whole, particularly for developing nations, the latter has led to the formation of concrete policy solutions to issues of common concern. It is important to note that some areas for improvement were suggested, which included the need to establish both a twinning program and adequate mechanisms for reporting. However, overall, the value of the international relations of the Ontario Legislature is strongly agreed upon, and the effectiveness of such relations are quite apparent.

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