

# Educating and Training Parliamentarians\*

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## *Introduction*

Parliamentarians perform complex, multi-dimensional roles that include scrutinising, passing, amending or rejecting legislation that establishes the rules by which a society is governed. Their careers prior to becoming parliamentarians reflect a wide variety of backgrounds. In many instances they have more than one career before being elected to public office. The proficiencies they develop in their pre-legislative careers can potentially equip them with many of the skills required to be a parliamentarian. However, the unique and important role of parliament necessitates a more sophisticated and managed approach to acquiring the appropriate abilities for a parliamentary career.

Parliaments<sup>3</sup> are the sovereign law-making body and decisions made by parliamentarians affect, in a fundamental way, the social and economic well-being of a society. Despite the crucial role they perform, parliamentarians receive little education, training or development to help them understand the peculiarities of parliaments. The lack of comprehensive and on-going education is increasingly being addressed by some parliaments trying to bridge the knowledge and skills gap.<sup>4</sup> However, the type of education, training and development being offered is

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<sup>3</sup> Legislatures have various names. For example in several countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand the term 'parliament' is used. In France they are referred to as the National Assembly, in Russia the Duma and in Japan the Diet. In the United State of America the term Congress is used. These institutions have one thing in common: 'they are constitutionally designated for giving assent to binding measures of public policy' and the assent is given 'on behalf of a political community that extends beyond the government elite responsible for formulation of those measures' (Norton 1990, as cited in Baldwin 2004: 295).

<sup>4</sup> In Australia, these programs are run in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Other jurisdictions so far identified to have such programs are: Uruguay, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu.

best described as rudimentary, especially when compared to that normally required and received for a trade or profession.

The idea that those who establish the laws by which a society is governed require education, training and development is not new. It goes back to what is commonly referred to as the birthplace of the concept of democracy, Athens.<sup>5</sup>

This paper begins by discussing the approach adopted by Ancient Athenians to the education and training of those who are very loosely equated to modern day parliamentarians. It recognises that even though there are many differences between the Ancient Athenian 'Ekklesia' and modern day parliaments, the basic principle of the need to educate and train law-makers is as valid today as it was 25 centuries ago.

In arguing the case for enhanced education, training and development for today's parliamentarians, the paper draws, in part, on the management literature, which can be adapted to address educational needs. It concludes by examining whether additional education, training and development is needed when parliamentarians transition from government to Opposition, and asks whether the common 'one size fits all' approach to the education and training of parliamentarians ignores particular skills required for the important legislative role of Opposition member.

### ***Lessons from the Past***

Arguments in favour of parliaments (as part of the state) providing on-going education and training to all parliamentarians is not new. Such strategies are found in the ancient Athenian classical concept of democracy. From its beginning, Athenian democracy developed a collective awareness of the necessity for the city-state of Athens to organise free public training, at its own expense, for all young entrants<sup>6</sup> from wards/parishes (the Demes)<sup>7</sup> to the Assembly of the Athenian Legislature (the Ekklesia)<sup>8</sup> (Keane, 2009: 31). This full-time training, referred to as Ephebia (or Ephebeia), lasted for one to two years and was delivered by experienced members of the City (Waterfield, 2004: 259). In keeping with the times, the Ephebia primarily focused on military, religious and community service-related matters involving specific knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs).<sup>9</sup> It also emphasised rhetoric and the skill to advocate for a political position in front of what

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<sup>5</sup> According to Keane (2009), there may have been earlier manifestations of democracy than Athens, but this is the first relatively well documented episode that produced the term as it is commonly used today (pp. ix-xii).

<sup>6</sup> This was at the statutory age of 18, which was the age at which young entrants were able to exercise the right to vote.

<sup>7</sup> Demes equates to wards or parishes. After the popular uprising against the tyrant Hippias in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the Athenian leader Kleisthenes divided Attica into 139 subregions, thus creating the first known 'electorates' in Western history.

<sup>8</sup> Ekklesia equates to the Assembly of the Athenian Legislature.

<sup>9</sup> This classification is based on Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains (Bloom, 1956). According to Bloom, knowledge refers to cognitive abilities, skills are represented by physical abilities to perform tasks, while attitudes refer to feelings and emotions associated to approaches to learning.

was then considered a large audience. Later, during the Hellenistic period (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC), the training became voluntary and was at times privately funded. Over time, education and training programs expanded to include philosophy, logic and the arts (e.g. poetry and music).<sup>10</sup>

It is understood that the Ekklesia is fundamentally different from modern day parliaments, and that its members were drawn from a limited franchise, which excluded women, slaves or non-Athenians (immigrants).<sup>11</sup> However, within the Athenians' limited idea of citizenship, all 'citizens' had a right to vote in relation to any matter tabled for discussion in the Ekklesia on a daily basis. Despite the fact that attendance and voting was optional and therefore unpredictable, and that there was a highly restricted form of political participation, the fact remains that the Ancient Athenians acknowledged the need for and supported education and training of their form of parliamentarian to a much greater degree than is apparent in many of today's parliaments.

The effectiveness of the adversarial setting promoted by Athenian legislative debates relied upon universal training being received by all representatives of the Ekklesia. This training provided a strong unifying context, based on what was later theorised as the principle of 'identity of interests'.<sup>12</sup> In the early days of Athenian struggle for survival as an independent City, the primacy of a sense of identity of interests for public security purposes (among other things) was not questioned by Athenian citizens. Their acceptance of the need for universal training was premised on the belief in the promise that those who served as law makers would leave their homeland to their successors 'larger and better' than they found it.<sup>13</sup>

The Ephebia 'teachers' and 'trainers' were recruited on the basis of their personal skills and public reputation, and involvement with Ephebia was regarded as the

<sup>10</sup> Specialist opinions regarding the actual content of the Ephebia are divergent, but it is widely agreed that this content varied over time, under different rule. Waterfield (2004: 259–60) states that in this 'two-year period of acculturation for young men aged between eighteen and twenty... following their enrolment into a deme...they were free from all other obligations...and were educated in everything from geography and politics to philosophy.'

<sup>11</sup> Athenian democracy was founded on the basis of citizenship as a privilege, not as a natural right. An Athenian citizen with full rights of access to the ekklesia was an adult male over 18, Athenian-born, free (not enslaved), and owning land or earning significant income from an accepted trade. Women, children and teenagers, slaves and foreigners were excluded (Keane, 2009). The Hellenistic period allowed certain foreigners (e.g. Roman aristocrats) the privilege to become Greek citizens, on the basis of their participation in Ephebeia training.

<sup>12</sup> The political theory of identity of interests was first formulated in Europe by Condorcet ([1794] 1955).

<sup>13</sup> 'I shall not bring shame upon these sacred weapons nor shall I abandon my comrades-in-arms wherever I stand in the ranks. I shall defend both the sacred and the profane aspects of life. I shall hand on the fatherland not smaller than I received it, but larger and better, so far as it lies in my power, with the assistance of all my fellow citizens. I shall obey the officials who govern wisely and the laws, both those which are already established and those which are wisely established in the future. If anyone attempts to destroy them, I shall not allow it, so far as it lies in my power with the assistance of all my fellow citizens.' (*Greek Historical Inscriptions* II, 204 as cited in Waterfield 2004: 260).

hallmark of their restricted notion of citizenship (Boardman, Griffin & Murray 1995: 229).

Education and training programs included the young Ephebes undertaking a tour of all City temples, learning about their history and how to serve the community by assisting those in need. This form of education and training helped them to understand better the interests of those they represented and to make decisions according to those interests.

It can be loosely inferred from the Ancient Athenians that the main significance of the education and training practices was twofold: (a) to develop professional standards in political life (especially in matters of security and defence); and (b) to transmit among civil and military leaders, across generations, those traditional values that had led to the rise of Athens. The Athenian approach to skilling and educating members of the Ekklesia recognised the need for these influential people to have an informed understanding of the traditional role of the institution in which they served, an appreciation of the core values which underpinned it and the need for those who served in the Ekklesia to acknowledge and impart community values in their deliberations. Such insights, the Athenians understood, could be aided by the development and enhancement of members' skills and abilities to perform their political role. This is often referred to today as enhancing an organisation's 'human resource capabilities or resources' (Boxall & Purcell, 2008).

The reason for raising the ancient past in this paper is to emphasise the need for a return to the tradition of training and education for parliamentarians by parliaments. Compared to the Ancient Athenians, the approach offered by today's parliaments appear piecemeal, short and finite. These shortcomings could be addressed, in part, by adopting a human resource development approach to the education and training of parliamentarians.

### ***Human Resource Management***

Drawing on the contemporary human resource development literature, the focus of organisational effectiveness and competence includes the on-going attraction, retention and development of human resource assets. A key theoretical perspective supporting the development of parliamentarians is the resource based view of the firm (RBV) (Barney, 1991). The theory focuses on human resources as the key asset of an organisation, (Boxall & Purcell, 2007). A particular feature of the RBV is its focus on the need to continuously develop the organisation's core human resources, to the extent that they become increasingly valuable, rare and difficult to replace or imitate. Whilst this theory provides a useful framework for analysis of an organisation's management of its key assets, the parliamentary perspective highlights an inherent weakness in the theory. The RBV assumes that each organisation pursues a linear, continuous path in the development of its human resources. It does not account for instances of 'Schumpeterian shock'. Named after the noted economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter, who developed the

theory, a Schumpeterian shock is a 'creative gale of destruction' which takes place in a sector or economy, and which radically redefines an organisation's environment (Schumpeter, 1950; Evans and Wurster, 2000).

'Schumpeterian shocks' are generally regarded as causing the destruction of an organisation (e.g. the collapse of Lehman Brothers Bank) or the need to rescue (or protect) an organisation in order to bring it back from the brink of destruction (e.g. General Motors,<sup>14</sup> Royal Bank of Scotland, Lloyds TSB Bank Plc<sup>15</sup> and HBOS Plc). By its nature, the parliamentary institution experiences a form of 'Schumpeterian Shock' when the government suffers electoral defeat, which results in many elected representatives going into Opposition.

The Opposition, as a political entity, has to rebuild its human resource stocks depleted in electoral defeat. A first step is the repositioning needed to become an effective Opposition and viable alternative government whilst simultaneously being constrained by a lack of power and the reduced resources available to an Opposition. The often overlooked issue of how Opposition rebuilds and performs, among other things, the important legislative role of holding government to account can be informed by the theoretical construct of the RBV.

### ***Education, Training and Development Needs of Members of the Opposition***

The role of parliamentarian is complicated by its dual nature. By that we mean a parliamentarian can be part of the government party (or parties) one day and Opposition member on another day. Current education, training and development programs offered by parliaments assume that the skills needed to perform these opposing roles are the same; but are they? Are there certain functions that are peculiar to the Opposition, or are the roles of government and Opposition members very similar, with the basic difference being one of perspective?

The following is a brief overview of the primary roles of parliamentarians, which highlight the major functions undertaken by them, whether in government or Opposition. It is followed by a discussion on the different emphasis in a parliamentarian's role when in Opposition.

The role of parliamentarians in a democratic system of government is, broadly defined, to represent the interests of the people, to scrutinise and pass legislation by which society is governed, and to oversee the actions of government, thereby ensuring governments are held to account for their decisions and actions (Davis & Weller, 2001: 155). It is the accountability nature of the role that often distinguishes a government member from that of Opposition member. As Norton (2008: 236) explains, 'the Opposition and individual Opposition parties are significant actors in exposing government to public challenge and oversight.' In many parliaments,

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<sup>14</sup> Details of the recent evolution of General Motors can be found in King & Terlep (2009).

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the recent history of Lloyds Bank, refer to Treanor (2009).

Opposition parties play a central role in Question Time and in the timetabling of parliamentary business (Norton 2008: 244). They are members of standing and ad hoc parliamentary committees and their committee role is not 'to serve as veto players but as persuasive actors in a consensual process' (Norton 2008: 246).

The legislative role of Opposition member involves some unique human resource management issues which present challenges and opportunities for parliaments to develop human resource management strategies designed to foster and develop their institutional human resource capabilities.

The uniqueness of Opposition lies in the fact that, while commercial organisations can go out of business due to changing environmental conditions, when parliamentarians are voted out of government, re-elected members move into the role of Opposition, thus preserving a place in the system (albeit in a different role). They continue within the parliament as individual parliamentarians and collectively as the Opposition, performing a vital legislative role scrutinising the Government and holding it to account.

At the same time as it is recovering from its previously mentioned Schumpeterian shock, an Opposition has to set in motion a process for regenerating its depleted (and often demoralised) human resource stocks. This rebuilding has to be undertaken with considerably reduced resources, such as the managerial, administrative and policy-making support available to governments from the public service.

An Opposition that has recently lost power is unlikely to have the necessary resources to educate and provide training, and will be focused, in the short to medium term at least, on the need to regroup so as to move forward.

But even if an Opposition had the funds and focus, the education, training and development of Opposition parliamentarians should not be left to political parties. The parliament, in the interest of its effectiveness as an institution, should take some responsibility for this group of members. Also, given that parliaments understand intimately the skills needed to effectively represent the people, in government and Opposition, it is the most appropriate institution to take on education, training and development responsibilities.

Support for the need for parliaments to train, educate and develop the skills of Opposition members can be found in the literature on justice and fairness (Cole & Latham, 1997; Skarlicki & Latham, 1997). Distributive justice can be assessed on two bases: equality, and need. The notion of equality holds that all opportunities and/or benefits should be uniformly and equally distributed to all individuals. However, it is the notion of need that is of more interest in relation to this paper, for it holds that certain groups have greater needs than others: some are advantaged (e.g. the government), while others are disadvantaged (e.g. the Opposition and minor political parties) in terms of access to support and resources required to enhance KSAs (Deutsch, 1975). Providing equal opportunities and/or benefits to all, irrespective of differences in levels of need, results in an unequal outcome. As a

consequence, the needs basis for distributive justice holds that the allocation of opportunities and/or benefits should be asymmetrical and biased towards the groups with the greatest needs. This approach, Folger, Sheppard and Buttram (1995) argue, leads to a more equitable outcome.

### ***Professional Development Approaches***

A possible way of encouraging parliaments to participate in the education and training, and hence the professional development, of Opposition members, is to deliver training on relevant KSAs that are free of partisan content. This suggestion is based on the premise that a core set of KSAs, essential to effective legislative activity but independent of partisan interests, is needed to enhance the effectiveness of any democratically elected parliament. The content of these KSAs may be historically and culturally relative, but this does not preclude the argument that a specific set of skills may be necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the Opposition and individual Opposition members. For example, the Opposition role is, in part, to identify problems in legislation put forward by government, whereas the government role is to convince the parliament that their legislation is in a format that should be passed. While this is a matter of perspective, the question for the parliament is: should it be offering particular education and training to Opposition members to enhance their skills in the scrutiny of legislation?

Another argument for parliaments to be involved in improving the professional development of Opposition members is that political parties define the public interest in ways that are contradictory, whereas a parliament defines itself as a public interest institution and identifies its role in terms of its unique and sovereign position.

### ***Conclusion***

An inherent weakness in the current approach to education and training programs for parliamentarians is the lack of KSAs relevant to their legislative roles and functions.

From a contemporary perspective, the argument can be made that training parliamentarians contributes to quality assurance i.e. assuring that constituents are properly represented in the parliament, that legislation is scrutinised properly and that government is held to account for its actions. Indeed, it could be argued that a parliament is abrogating its institutional responsibilities in not continually improving its capabilities through educating and training its membership.

In democratic political systems, Opposition plays a crucial role for, as Helms reminds us, 'there can be no real democracy without Opposition' (Helms, 2008: 6). It is therefore in the interest of all members of a society to not only have an appropriately trained government but also to have and adequately trained Opposition. ▲

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