

# What really happens inside a Liberal caucus meeting?



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I mentioned last week that I was preparing to go on a three-day caucus retreat. When I returned it occurred to me that you might find it interesting to hear about what happens at caucus meetings. Traditionally caucus meetings are confidential. This confidentiality allows all members to speak their mind freely without fear of embarrassing their party or their colleagues. No one but your colleagues will know that you lost your temper with the premier or suggested to some honorable minister that his or her prize piece of new legislation was going to need more than just a little work if your constituents were to cope with it.

However, within this tradition of confidentiality it is possible to describe what goes on at a caucus meeting or a caucus retreat in a general way. Ordinarily full caucus meetings occur from 10 a.m. until noon on Tuesdays when the Legislature is in session and are designed to allow the members to discuss the day to day business of the Legislature. Between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. on the same day groups may make presentations to the caucus members or caucus committees may meet.

Caucus retreats allow time for ministers to make presentations about legislation being developed or for more general discussions about the future direction of party

policy. The retreats also provide all members with time to have discussions away from the pressure of scheduled to meet and phones to answer and staff with letters to sign.

Caucus is the time when distinctions between ministers and backbenchers or the premier and parliamentary assistants become blurred. Anyone can express their opinion of government and party policy. Everyone is encouraged to make suggestions or voice complaints about the matters at hand. Criticism is often quite fierce and caucus discussions can and do lead directly to changes in government policy or legislation.

The Liberal Party's most recent caucus retreat was held at Geneva Park at what was formerly a church camp. The buildings are designed to promote the meeting of small groups for informal discussions as well as larger more formal gatherings. The large sessions at which all attended concentrated on the future direction of government policy. A great deal of the party's election platform from 1985 and 1987 has been carried out or is presently before the House or Committee. With this in mind, the future priorities of the Liberal government are in the process of being developed.

The discussions ranged from the state of the economy to the importance of initiatives to preserve the environment. Federal-provincial relations, the Meech Lake accord, taxes, health and education were all examined with a view to determining the position Ontario should adopt.

It was in the more informal, small group meeting that the most

far reaching discussions developed. Arguments both for and against radical solutions to environmental problems were made. MPPs from ridings experiencing very rapid growth compared notes on problems and solutions. Cabinet members were button holed with the hope of influencing government policy one way or another. Most importantly, ideas and information were shared more completely than is possible when MPPs are immersed in the office, committee or constituency work that usually makes up their days.

For those of you who are interested in political gossip, I will admit that the next election was discussed. I don't consider this a breach of confidentiality because every gathering of politicians tends to discuss either the next election or the last one. The premier was given a great deal of advice on the timing of Ontario's next election. Unfortunately, nearly every date from now until the fall of 1992 came up during the three days.

Now that the caucus retreat is over members will go back to their ridings to deal with individual concerns. However, the three days have left us with a renewed understanding of the importance of constant communication and planning for the future.



## Cheque-ing in

The Open Door program was presented with a \$400 cheque Feb. 6 from Elizabeth's Fashions. The money was raised during the recent Fifth Annual Bridal Show. Heather Burke, Elizabeth's store manager (left) presents the cheque to Vanessa Bell-Smith, the executive director of the young parents program. (Herald photo)

## Seniors, low-income families can get free tax help

Income tax returns will be done at no charge, by volunteers from the local branch of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario. This service is only for seniors, and low income families whose single income is no higher than \$14,000 without dependents or \$19,000 with dependents.

Dates for the Georgetown Library are March 7 and 13 from 7-9 p.m. Dates for the Acton Library are March 6 and 14 from 7-9 p.m. Please make an appointment by calling 873-2881 or 853-0301. Register early, as space is limited. Registration begins Feb. 6.

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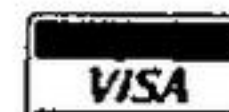
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