

“Maintaining balance requires tact and political acumen.”

Jacques Chagnon, a member of the Quebec Liberal Party, was elected president of the National Assembly in Quebec in April 2011 after serving as vice president since 2007. He was first elected to the Assembly in 1985 and has been re-elected ever since.

From 1985 to 1994, Chagnon was parliamentary assistant to the minister for administration and public service. In 1994, he was appointed as the minister responsible for education, administration of legislation regarding professions, and application of the charter of the French language.

From 1994 to 2003, when his party was in the opposition, he served in a variety of roles. When his party regained power in 2003, he served as minister of public security.



State Legislatures: Explain what you see as the most meaningful difference between the National Assembly in Québec and legislatures in the United States.

Chagnon: The executive and legislative powers are not articulated the same way in Québec’s British-style parliamentary system. The premier and the ministers, who together form the executive, are first and foremost elected representatives and sit in the National Assembly with all the other elected members. The premier thus has a direct hand in the legislative process and can introduce legislation, take part in the ensuing deliberations and vote bills into law. In addition, it’s the premier’s prerogative to dissolve the National Assembly and call elections, which aren’t held on fixed dates, although there is a five-year limit on any given legislature.

At every sitting of the Assembly, the premier and the ministers are held to account and must answer the opposition’s questions during Question Period, which is one of the tools available to Parliament to scrutinize the government’s actions.

SL: Describe the role of the president, or speaker, in your parliamentary system.

Chagnon: In the parliamentary arena, the president’s role is to chair the proceedings of the National Assembly in a completely neutral fashion. He opens, suspends and adjourns sittings, preserves order

and decorum, and enforces the Standing Orders during debates. He sees that the rights and privileges of the Assembly and its members are upheld so business can be conducted efficiently and without any kind of hindrance. His functions also include deciding who has the floor, calling motions for discussion in the House and announcing the results after a vote is held. To quote the Standing Orders, the president has all such powers as he may require to perform his duties.

SL: How, in your opinion, should the speaker’s role be exercised in the House?

Chagnon: I was called up to the chair to serve as president of the National Assembly of Québec, one of the world’s oldest legislative assemblies and the only one in North America with French as its working

language, on April 5, 2011.

As president, I take care to observe the rules, customs and traditions that are part of our heritage, and I defend the rights and privileges of the Assembly and its members, no matter what the circumstances. I rely on fundamental values such as transparency, openness, tolerance, dignity and respect to arbitrate our deliberations with neutrality, impartiality and discernment. I also make sure that order and decorum are maintained throughout our proceedings.

SL: What are your main functions as speaker.

Chagnon: I have three main functions. The first, as mentioned earlier, is to chair the sittings of the National Assembly. The second is to head up the administration of the Assembly and a staff of 700 or so whose support and collaboration are invaluable to me in seeing that the elected members have access to all the services they need to discharge their office. I prepare the Assembly’s annual budget estimates and chair the Office of the National Assembly, which is the Assembly’s board of directors, as it were. I am also responsible for the security of the buildings and offices where the members and the Assembly staff go about their work.

And last but not least, my third main function is to raise the Assembly’s visibility both in Québec and on the international stage by developing relations with other parliaments, among other ways.

Promoting democratic values is important to me, and I'm involved in a number of awareness and educational activities to help Quebecers learn about the different aspects of their representatives' work.

SL: How do you assert your authority in the Assembly, particularly during Question Period?

Chagnon: By being objective, impartial and fair toward all members, regardless of their political affiliation. I hand down rulings in the same spirit and always try to make the best possible decisions in light of the circumstances, with a humorous twist if it's appropriate.

SL: Tell us about the challenge of maintaining a balance between the government and the opposition.

Chagnon: Maintaining that balance requires tact and political acumen. It's my job to safeguard the rights of all parliamentarians and enforce the Standing Orders. I must make sure the voices of all the people's representatives are heard in the chamber. I must see that the minority has the opportunity to speak, while allowing the majority to play its proper role in the organization of proceedings. So it's a delicate role, but one that is of capital importance for our institution in terms of its capacity to run smoothly. The president must have good credibility in the members' eyes for his rulings to be accepted. That's why neutrality and impartiality are so vital.

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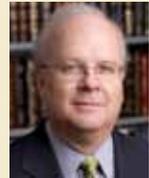
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