

A REBEL with a CAUSE

My 30 days with the Minister of State

Denis Lebel was sworn in as Minister of State for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec on October 30, 2008. That was a Thursday. The following Monday morning, I joined him in Ottawa as a member of his “CED 101” briefing team. I was about to spend the entire month of November at his side as his press secretary. Here is an insider’s look at some defining moments of the Minister’s first 30 days in office.

By
Jean Décarv

The call – Montréal, Friday October 31, 5:00 p.m.

I get a phone call from Gatineau. It’s Rita Tremblay, the Deputy Minister’s Chief of Staff: “I heard you might be interested in a political experience. Still up for it?” – “Uhh... yes!” “Fine, we’ll be expecting you at 9 a.m. on Monday morning for the transition briefing.” The whole affair is decided on the spot. – “In Montréal?” – “Oh, no, in Ottawa.” – “OK.” (Note to self: buy a suit, maybe two, and a few ties I could alternate just to mix it up a little).

Two things keep me busy over the weekend: shopping and reading—about CED, about the Conservative Party and about Denis Lebel. I learn that the economic torch travelled from Alma to Roberval, all the way up the Saguenay River to the shores of Lac Saint-Jean. Confident he could take this riding that sovereignists long considered one of their strongholds, Denis Lebel informed his fellow-citizens on August 6, 2007, that “I may have chaired my last meeting as Mayor of Roberval.” He was elected Member of Parliament on September 17, 2007. The new MP was already in the federal capital when, on October 1, the City Council read out his letter of resignation and sent its “sincere congratulations.”

“Winning a by-election is not the easiest way of getting into politics. You’re out of sync with everyone. I learned how to fend for myself that year,” he says, looking back. When the House wasn’t sitting, the Minister would get into his car and drive back home. “I’ve got my own route. It takes me six and a half hours.”

I learn from my reading that Denis Lebel is a pure product of his native region. I had imagined him as a high-energy jack-of-all-trades, and I wasn’t far off the mark. His lightning academic career consisted of high school in Roberval and CÉGEP in Saint-Félicien. He admits to me later, without a trace of embarrassment or any attempt to forestall judgment: “You know, Jean, I didn’t stay in school very long.” He was evidently impatient to make his mark in the region: at Hôtel-Dieu de Roberval, at l’Ermitage Saint-Antoine, at Hôtel de la Grotte in Lac Bouchette, in the historic village of Val-Jalbert, on the executive of the Union des municipalités du Québec, etc.

“I’m a fighter. I like it when the going gets tough. I’m more of a rebel than a Lebel.”



Photo: Luc Beaulieu

During a visit to Montréal after stormy weeks on Parliament Hill, the Minister adds a little “colour” to the Awards Ceremony Christmas tree.

On the eve of my departure for Ottawa, I dust off the memoirs of several illustrious former political advisors and pull out some of the classics of the genre, including *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, *The Prince* by Machiavelli and even the maxims of La Fontaine. I hastily highlight a few gems: “occupy the space available,” “in politics, not all truths are good to tell,” “embrace the talents that you find in yourself,” “all flatterers live at the expense of those who listen to them” and “rotate your ties in a subtle manner” (that one was mine).

Ottawa – Transition, Monday, November 1, 9:00 a.m.

The Deputy Minister introduces me to the Minister. A firm handshake, a penetrating look, a gracious attitude; the message, right from the get-go, is: “Jean, thank you for being here, I really appreciate being able to count on you.” (Note to self: The Minister is counting on you. Keep it up.) He probably means it, too, because for

all intents and purposes, the newly sworn-in Minister is left to his own devices at the start of his mandate. His Chief of Staff, Yan Plante, former political advisor and foot soldier in the Tory war room during the elections, already has his hands full organizing the Office.

The briefing is divided up into eight blocks spread out over less than three days: regional policy and planning, communications, regional operations, short- and medium-term issues, infrastructure, hot files, related legislation, and other topics. It’s like a highly-concentrated dose of CED, with little sandwiches and coffee to help you digest it all. The Minister is attentive, cutting in to clarify a thought, define his objectives, and wonder about the whys and wherefores of this or that. I scribble down notes such as: *people-oriented, future-oriented and focussed on results*. I refer back to Sun Tzu: “The man who has no goals is not likely to attain them.” A classic, like I said.

TABLE of Contents

Word from the Editor	2
A Rebel with a cause	3
<i>La Relève</i> at CED	4
Policy and Planning Sector Organizational Days	5
Technology: Goodbye Groupwise, hello Outlook!	6
The old lady’s 400 years	6
News from the business offices	7
Inside CED: André Dion	8
Government of Canada Workplace Charitable Campaign 2008	9
Destination Partnership	10
Legal Capsule	10
Regions on the move	11-12



Continued from page 1

5:00 p.m. My first moment alone with the Minister. We are crammed into my makeshift work area at the Gatineau office. My brain has turned to mush. What is most surprising about Denis Lebel when you interact with him face to face is that he is exactly the same as the image he projects: simple, friendly, and sure of his abilities. But what is more astonishing is his capacity for work. – “You must have had enough by now. Not too tired?” – “You know, I’m used to this pace of living.” He looks as fresh as a rose. If he had time, he would probably swim a few lengths of the pool, shoot the puck around for a while with some of his hockey-playing colleagues on the Hill, or cycle the 216 km around Lac-Saint-Jean in his customary six hours and 31 minutes (which I understand is a pretty decent time).

I quiz him to quickly get his point of view about developing a line of argument on a few questions of interest I’ve come up with on the relationship between politics and administration, etc. “Have you thought of A? What about B?” etc. He politely listens to me talking, smiles and says: “I’m just now realizing how well supported you are when you become a minister!” Memo in my notebook: *Team guy*.

Some would call the Conservatives ideologues. The member for Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean’s temperament is more that of a pragmatic realist. “When you keep missing the target, you need to take aim with the other eye,” he exclaims in the middle of a meeting with upper management. The ballistic reference is right on target, considering the Deputy Minister’s love of hunting.

Speech from the Throne – Ottawa, week of November 17

After a three-day detour to Winnipeg where the Conservatives were holding their first major gathering since their return to power in 2006, Minister Lebel arrives back in Ottawa for the start of his first parliamentary session as a Member of Cabinet.

Meanwhile, things have evolved. The Minister’s Office is starting to take shape with the confirmation of the post of Christiane Huot, Administrative Assistant and veritable rock and anchor of the team. Also newly arrived are Senior Assistant Éric Lefebvre, a one-time Conservative candidate in Richmond and likeable entrepreneur-philanthropist; Manon Laliberté, Parliamentary Assistant, tri-athlete and indefatigable worker; Pierre Miquelon, Political Advisor under Jean-Pierre Blackburn and baseball player in his off hours; and Michel Pigeon, driver and all-round joker.

His ministerial load is increased by the addition of a key position on the Cabinet Operations Committee chaired by Minister Jim Prentice. This Committee ensures day-to-day coordination of the government’s program and handles questions related to



Photo: Luc Beaulieu

Minister Lebel congratulates award recipients and all employees during the Recognition Ceremony: “I’m counting on your experience to support and guide me in my mandate.”

planning legislative and parliamentary activities as well as communications. It is a mandate whose importance lies in governance, which is crucial for this Minister, who had sealed himself off in his office under a mountain of documents prior to the first meeting. One month later, he says, “I love my role on this strategic committee; it deals with all of the hot issues head on.”

Denis Lebel’s rise to prominence within the Harper Cabinet is no accident. Since his arrival on the mine-strewn battlefield of Parliament Hill, the big shots at the “PMO” (*Prime Minister’s Office*) have already had an opportunity to judge the true mettle of the man from Roberval. The general feeling is that he is well liked in the PM’s Office—and the feeling is mutual.

Denis Lebel uses the term “great man” when he tells of the Prime Minister calling him to explain the federal approach in the forestry file. And you should have seen how the PM’s right-hand man and advisor for Quebec, Dimitri Soudas, reacted in the antechamber upon first seeing the Minister put another member in his place when challenged on the economic file. The tone is set. I remember the Minister telling me on the first day: “I’m a fighter. I like it when the going gets tough. I’m more of a rebel than a Lebel,” he jokes. When it comes to the national question, his rebellious side is all the more evident, especially in his reputedly separatist native region. He makes a point, however of adding: “Yes, I am a federalist, but with a very strong local colour.”

In spite of his generally-positive reception and several rapturous reviews, including the one by *La Presse* columnist Vincent Marissal, who called him “the PC’s best card in Quebec,” the Minister has few illusions. “I’ll take the

flowers, but I realize that the pot will hit me one day, too.” While preparing himself for recriminations from some quarters, the Member for Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean is already receiving *desiderata* from others—his parliamentary colleagues. In the elevator that takes him back to his office, a Quebec MP tells the Minister, after a short polite preamble: “I have a whole list of projects for you!” In a colourful phrase, the Minister comments that someone has just slipped him a *monkey*.

The Economic and Financial Statement – Ottawa, week of November 24

Following a tacit agreement with the Chief of Staff, I am ready to go back to Montréal as soon as the *Economic and Financial Statement* is announced. The Minister has already had about 20 interviews since coming to office. The journalists have adopted him. And that entails certain adjustments—especially for the regulars from his region who make his cell phone chime at practically any moment of the day. The former mayor notes that he will have to resign himself to renouncing this privileged access and let his entourage filter his calls.

The day the *Economic Statement* is read out in the House, I join Éric Lefebvre in the anteroom. We have our briefing books in hand, marked “For internal use only.” We can already sense the games gearing up in the wings. When I arrive at Parliament, the candidates for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada, Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae, are standing by to talk to the media. The word “election” is echoing through the foyer at the very moment the Minister of Finance reads out the Statement in the House.

We return to the office around 5:00 p.m. to hastily analyze the Economic Statement. The Minister is expected at RDI at 7:00 p.m. and another 14 interviews are already planned for the following morning, starting at 6:50 a.m. What questions should he anticipate? Which messages should he stress? There are serious issues at stake. The Minister analyzes the reaction to the Statement.

The following day, the ministerial armada whisks me away at 6:15 a.m. for the beginning of a final day that promises to be strenuous. We set up in the Minister’s office to prepare for a media blitz. Notebooks and tape recorders in hand, the interviewers come relentlessly one after the other. Their questions probe practically every square inch of the MP’s own region, sometimes spilling over into the surrounding territory, and even stretching all the way down to Montréal.

Then it’s time for question period. The political staff in the anteroom are absorbed by their *BlackBerries*. Not even the pictures hanging on the walls of Conservative MPs and ministers in the heat of the action can distract them. Only the clamour in the House occasionally draws their attention to the TV monitors. A computer is made available to staff. We learn from the *Cyberpresse* site that a possible coalition is in the works. Someone makes a copy of the article for the Minister, who joins us after a very turbulent session. We leave quietly by a back door to avoid the mob and borrow a colleague’s office for one last interview with *Maisonneuve à l’écoute* before the Minister leaves for Roberval. His messages are tweaked to perfection after the morning’s grilling.

Finally, I make my exit through the main doors of the Parliament Building. The event feels at once ironic and symbolic: ironic in that I have the sense “of leaving political life” at the height of political upheaval (only a week later, the parliamentary session would be prorogued), with several people already predicting the short-lived existence of this 40th Parliament, and symbolic in that the exit really is in the shape of a crossroads. The driver arrives to pick up the Minister at the front door. Next, a cordial handshake from a very likeable guy. “I have no doubt that we will end up meeting each other again, one way or another,” he declares, equally unsure of how things are going to turn out. Only the previous day he had confided to me: “I got into politics to get things done. I hope I’ll have the chance to do so.” The resumption of Parliament is planned for January 26. Only then we will really know if Lebel *the rebel* gets the chance to defend his cause—the vitality of the regions of Quebec.