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# ROOKIES' GUIDE TO PARLIAMENT

*The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*



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## Cabinet chief of staff Savannah DeWolfe talks managing an 'intense' Hill job

For rookies starting out on the Hill, DeWolfe emphasized the importance of communication, and providing the full picture regarding decisions.

BY JESSE CNOCKAERT

It's intense working on Parliament Hill, but veteran staffer Savannah DeWolfe says part of what's kept her coming back over the years are the positive relationships she's forged, in particular with her longtime boss, Justice Minister Sean Fraser, with whom she's worked for a decade in various positions, from campaigns to his constituency office to cabinet.

"Most of my deep friendships have come from people that I've worked with on the Hill. I sincerely don't doubt that I'm not done making friends yet because there are a lot of good people who do these jobs," said DeWolfe. "And you have to, to a certain extent, just because of the pace and because of the demands."

A former lawyer with McInnes Cooper in Halifax, DeWolfe has acted as a close aide to Fraser (Central Nova, N.S.) for most of the last 10 years, and currently serves as his chief of staff. DeWolfe said that her responsibilities managing a team of about 20 political staffers means there's always something to do.

"A lot of people want a lot of things from you all at once," she said. "It is really high energy and really exciting, and you go from that stakeholder meeting, [and then] you're in the House after that, you are helping draft a speech after that, or you're trying to turn out a social post after that, and you can see right away what the benefits or drawbacks of your work was."

DeWolfe's background includes serving as a Senate Page, and as a legal intern for the United Nations. She first met Fraser in 2015 while attending his first cabinet swearing-in ceremony where she also met several members of his family.

"It's pretty funny. I was sitting in the crowd and everybody I talked to was, seemingly, related to him. And now I know he has five sisters. His mom was there. His wife was there," said DeWolfe. "Afterwards, I just kind of met him briefly and went about my business."

At the time, DeWolfe said she was looking for a new job—and, luckily, she didn't have to wait long before Fraser reached out to her.

"Sean called me the next night, and said, 'Hey, my family all really liked you. We didn't get to talk very much like, why don't we go grab a coffee?' And so we did, and agreed to start working together there on the spot," she recalled.

DeWolfe got started as an executive assistant in Fraser's MP office, and has stuck close to Fraser for most of the time since, including serving as his campaign manager during the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

In 2018, DeWolfe moved into her first cabinet-level role as an Atlantic regional adviser and assistant to the parliamentary secretary to then-environment minister Catherine McKenna. At the time, Fraser was McKenna's parliamentary secretary. DeWolfe has since also been policy and legal affairs director to Fraser during his time as then-minister of immigration, refugees, and citizenship.

DeWolfe's current position is actually the second time she's served as Fraser's chief of staff, having also held that role between 2023 and 2025 when Fraser was serving as the minister



for housing, infrastructure, and communities.

After years working together, DeWolfe and Fraser briefly parted early this year. In December 2024, Fraser announced an intention to leave the federal cabinet in the next shuffle, and not seek re-election in his Nova Scotia riding. As a result, DeWolfe briefly moved on to serve as the director for Canada for Tent Partnership, an organization that advises member companies on how they can build effective refugee hiring programs and integrate refugees into their workforces.

However, Fraser's plans to leave the Hill changed shortly after Prime Minister Mark Carney (Nepean, Ont.) took office on March 14. Fraser subsequently accepted Carney's offer to come back to lead the justice portfolio, which in turn led to DeWolfe returning to once again run Fraser's ministerial office in June.

When asked if she would consider working as a staffer to anyone besides Fraser, DeWolfe said it would be tough to say.

"I think, for me, I really will have to like the principal I'm working for, and probably have a relationship with them and understand their vision and espouse it. It's not just that I want to be a chief of staff or hold the office," she said. "Is Sean the only funny, smart, kind minister on the Hill? Probably not, but he's the only one that I've come to know well enough to be able to say that about him."

DeWolfe described Fraser as "one of the nicest people you'll meet in or out of politics." The minister has also played an important role in DeWolfe's life as he's the person who introduced her to her now-wife, Emily, in 2016.

According to DeWolfe, she and Fraser were leaving a restaurant in Ottawa when they happened to run into Emily, who at the time

was vice-president external for the St. Francis Xavier University students' union. Fraser was familiar with Emily, who in her university role managed external affairs for the student union, including with the federal government.

"They were actually lobbying that week, I think, and Emily—we physically bumped into her, and he said, 'Oh, Savannah, this is Emily,'" she said. "It was just like, 'here's a really wonderful young person from our riding, and you guys should get to know each other.' And we became friends, and then ended up dating."

DeWolfe said being a queer woman on the Hill hasn't been a disadvantage, but instead, in a way, has contributed to her being more effective in her work.

"I've been really close with Sean for a decade ... and I've never once had someone suggest that anything unbecoming was happening there. And I'm very mindful that if I weren't married and I weren't queer, people would say those kinds of things, and I've seen that happen to colleagues and it's awful," she said. "There are just certain things that are off the table or that people don't wonder about me in the same way. I find I just can engage a little bit more effectively with a range of different people because of who I am and where I sit at all of those kind of intersections."

DeWolfe said she thinks the work culture on the Hill has improved during her time there.

"There's just all of that extra stuff that women who work in politics have to bear, and I think, for me, it's not that I've been immune or shielded from it, but it's that I've been able to navigate it a little bit more effectively, I think, just because I'm very openly me in a way that not everybody gets to be, or not everybody can be," she said. "I remember it being a little bit more toxic than it is right now."



Savannah DeWolfe, centre, is chief of staff to Justice Minister Sean Fraser, left. Photograph courtesy of Savannah DeWolfe



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Savannah DeWolfe, left, alongside her boss now-Justice Minister Sean Fraser at the United Nations International Migration Review Forum in New York City in May 2022. At the time, Fraser was immigration minister, and DeWolfe was his director of policy and legal affairs. Photograph courtesy of Savannah DeWolfe

DeWolfe grew up in Gaetz Brook, N.S., where she first took an interest in the Liberal Party through volunteer positions for community events.

"To the extent there was anything to do in the community, it was often an event that some either church group or community organization was putting on, and in our case, it was often the Liberal Party," she said. "In a rural community, [political parties] really provide a lot of value in those spaces where otherwise there's sometimes ... not events or even just community gatherings. It kind of started that way. As I grew up and started to ask myself where my value set was, it landed squarely with the party."

Her interest in politics grew later during her time as a Senate Page.

"You're in the Chamber, you're in the Senate Committees, [and] you're listening to all of these policymakers debate these really complex things," she said. "I think just being in the room for those conversations, it started to really pique my interest in what other conversations were happening and what other kind of spaces around that the Hill were filled with it."

In terms of advice for rookies starting out on the Hill, DeWolfe emphasized the importance of communication, and providing the full picture regarding decisions, rather than just giving orders.

"When you bring people into the thing you're trying to do, instead of just kind of giving people orders without context, especially, you get a lot further," she said. "Because of the time that we're in and the pace that everything goes ... sometimes we just tell people what we need instead of telling them the challenge we're facing. I find just that reframing has been really effective for me and for my teams over the years."

As a chief of staff, DeWolfe also said it is important to encourage staffers to think of themselves as part of a team.

As an example, she cited a famous story about former United States President John F. Kennedy, and his goal of putting the first human on the moon. According to the story, Kennedy was visiting NASA in 1962 and



Savannah DeWolfe, centre, chief of staff to Justice Minister Sean Fraser, left, described her boss as 'one of the nicest people you'll meet in or out of politics.' Photograph courtesy of Savannah DeWolfe

I'll say that I think the culture has improved, myself. But that's not to say it's fixed. It's just not the way that I think I was coming in 2015 seeing it."

asked a janitor what he did for the organization. In response, the Janitor said, "I'm helping put a man on the moon."

"I don't think anybody on my team thinks their job is just one piece of the thing. I've worked really hard to make sure that, over the years, my teams are brought into the thing that we're

all doing, and that they can see how their work really contributes to it," said DeWolfe. "You're never, ever going to give me a memo or speech or a draft tweet and not know where it ends up, or not get credit for that, or not see it through."

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## Life lessons for staffers at the start of a new sitting

The most basic and essential rookie advice is simple: be kind to everyone you meet.

Marci Surkes

Opinion



Staffers wait for their bosses outside of a Liberal cabinet meeting in the West Block on March 10. Politics can often feel like it's just about outmaneuvering the other side, but at its core, it's about people, writes Marci Surkes. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

This new sitting of Parliament marks the real parliamentary kick-off of the Carney era. With Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre poised to reclaim his jousting position across the aisle at two sword lengths, the restart of committee business, and a flurry of action on a compressed pre-budget timetable, there can be no doubt that the honeymoon is over.

I've written before in these pages about how staff can survive—and thrive—in their roles in Parliament, but it bears repeating as the 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament gets underway in earnest following the spring election.

In addition to the new Prime Minister Mark Carney vs. Poil-

ievre dynamic, this minority Parliament will present tests for all of the parties, including those without recognized status. The alliances are fragile, and the atmosphere in the House has the potential to be even more polarized than before thanks in part to the "presidentialized" result of April's general election. Every legislative vote will carry more weight, every negotiation will feel more consequential. For MPs, strategy is everything; for the staff working for them—particularly those new to the Hill—it means being dropped into an environment where the

pace is relentless, the rules are half-written, and expectations are sky high.

The truth is, the hardest part of being a staffer isn't the policy work, the social media plan, or scheduling woes. If there's one thing I learned as a staffer for almost two decades, it's that what carries you through are people, the shared sense of purpose, and learning from the hard lessons.

On the Hill, careers turn in ways no one expects. The colleagues you share a late-night pizza with may be your next chief of staff or even a Member of Parliament tomorrow. The most

basic and essential rookie advice is simple: be kind to everyone you meet. Respect the intern, be sure to thank the committee clerk, and make sure all stakeholders feel heard. Embrace the constituents and school visitors, and teach them what you know—remember that, for them, a visit to the Hill is not an everyday occurrence, but a memory. It was my Grade 6 trip to Ottawa that helped spawn my lifelong attachment to Canadian politics, and to Parliament in particular.

**Ottawa is built on long memories, and reputations last longer than job titles.** The impression you make early will follow you, sometimes years later. The Parliamentary Precinct is literally a four-block radius—a unique community that, despite the Question Period divisiveness, truly is a small town that brings people together. Whether it's running into reporters, having coffee at Little Victories with fellow staff, or bumping into political opponents at the gym, it will never hurt to lean into the community. A city this size means you're never far from help if you've built goodwill along the way.

**Your political opponents are not your enemies.** Differing views on policy and process are good, healthy, and in the best interests of decision-making. Believing that your views matter more than the views of others is unhelpful—both to you, and to the Canadians depending on you to help strengthen our most precious democratic institution. You can be friends with staffers from other parties. You will ultimately be a

more rounded and thoughtful person if you make the effort to understand opposing positions. And sometimes, your views may be more aligned than you think.

**Appreciate the moment.** Be kind, be respectful, and be thoughtful to your yeses and noes. But above all, try to be present; the pace of Parliament makes it easy to rush from one crisis to the next, without ever looking up. You are part of something incredible. Years from now, you'll remember those long nights, the rushed QP prep, and the committee marathons as amazing contributions to making this great nation of ours work. But hopefully, you'll also remember the meaningful friendships and mentors who helped you through it all.

Politics can often feel like it's just about outmaneuvering the other side on procedure, or thinking strategically about how to improve the polls, but at its core, it's about people. More importantly, it's about making Canadians' lives better, no matter which side of the aisle you happen to be on or cheer for.

Welcome back to Parliament, folks. Thank you for your service.

Marci Surkes is managing director and chief strategy officer at Compass Rose, a national government relations and public affairs firm helping clients to find the uncommon common good. She spent 15 years as a senior Hill staffer, most recently as executive director of policy and cabinet affairs in the Prime Minister's Office from 2019-2022.

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## Thriving on the Hill: a survival guide for new staffers



Staffers socialize at a party marking the start of the fall sitting in September 2024. The friendships and professional connections you form in your first months will be the foundation of your career for years to come, writes Jordan Paquet. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

Parliament Hill can be a tough environment, but it can also shape some of the most fulfilling careers in public life.

Jordan Paquet

Opinion



Starting a job on Parliament Hill can be exhilarating and overwhelming in equal measure. The Hill has its own culture, its own rhythm, and its own unwritten rules. For new staffers, the learning curve can feel steep. But if you approach it with the right mindset, it can be one of the most rewarding and formative experiences of your career.

The first piece of advice is simple: be proactive. Parliament doesn't move at a leisurely pace. Priorities change in an instant, deadlines tighten without warning, and opportunities come and go quickly. The staffers who thrive are the ones who anticipate needs before they're spoken. Think about what your MP, your team, or your party will need next and get moving on it. If you're already answering the second question before the first one has even been asked, you'll quickly become indispensable.

Second, never forget that your reputation is your currency. On the Hill, trust is everything. People will quickly judge you on whether you're reliable, discreet, and professional. Always follow through on commitments, guard sensitive information carefully, and treat everyone—whether they're a senior cabinet minister, or a new intern—with respect. Word travels fast in politics, and you want your name associated with competence and integrity. The relationships you build, and the trust you earn, will outlast the job you have today.

And speaking of relationships: network relentlessly. Following on the previous advice, your network is your net worth. Politics is a people business, after all. The friendships and professional connections you form in your first months will be the foundation of your career for years

to come. Don't silo yourself to your own office, or even your own political party. Get to know as many people as possible. The person you are eating breakfast with in the cafeteria today could be a ministerial chief of staff tomorrow, or even a future cabinet minister, and could be the person who recommends you for your next big role.

There's a common notion that staff are just "behind the scenes." In reality, staff make Parliament work. MPs rely on their teams for policy research, communications, logistics, and strategy. A well-timed briefing note or a sharp line in a speech or media appearance can shape a debate, influence a decision, or shift a narrative. You might not get public recognition—you're there to make your political boss look good, after all—but your fingerprints will be all over the process. Never underestimate the weight of the role you play.

At the same time, the Hill isn't all socializing and policy wins. It's long hours, unpredictable schedules, relentless pressure, and unlimited amounts of caffeine, so make sure to protect your well-being. If you don't manage your time and find outlets outside of politics to unwind, it can catch up to you. Do whatever it takes to remind yourself that you're more than your job.

Finally, don't make your job harder than it needs to be. Too often, staffers try to reinvent the wheel when the tools are already there. Take advantage of the caucus support structures, and the deep bench of institutional memory among more experienced colleagues. Ask questions. Borrow templates. Learn the shortcuts. You're not being paid to suffer through inefficiency; you're being paid to deliver results and be a part of the movement.

Parliament Hill can be a tough environment, but it can also shape some of the most fulfilling careers in public life. If you work hard, guard your reputation, build relationships, and look after yourself, you'll find the Hill is more than just a workplace. It's a crash course in leadership, loyalty, and the rewarding business of democracy. For those just getting started: welcome to your new adventure in the big leagues.

*Jordan Paquet is vice-president at Bluesky Strategy Group in Ottawa. A former Conservative Hill staffer, he has worked in the offices of an MP, minister, opposition leader, and prime minister.*

*The Hill Times*



Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, centre, speaks with reporters in the West Block in May 2023 accompanied by his then-media relations director Sebastian Skamski, left. As a staffer, performance-based accountability tells you everything you need to know about how to work, grow, and succeed, writes Don Guy. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

## Note to staff: leave no stone unturned, and ask for help

The moment, and your direct bosses—and their bosses, the voting taxpayers—are looking for you to rise to the occasion.

Don Guy

Opinion



If you are new to the Hill, congratulations, you have secured the opportunity of a lifetime that will grow experience and relationships that will shape you for the rest of your life. If you are returning, I know you appreciate that opportunity even more after the roller-coaster ride of the past year that left many wondering whether they were going to be looking for new employment.

It was a busy summer for many, but I know that many also took the chance to reflect on the last few years and months, and the moment in which we find ourselves.

The moment, and your direct bosses—and their bosses, the voting taxpayers—are looking for you to rise to the occasion, which means finding ways to be even better at your jobs.

There are many things that I like about the cultural shift and tone that Prime Minister Mark Carney is bringing to the government, signalling that the hierarchy of ins and outs based on anything other than your ability to do your job is a thing of the past. I believe, based on what I am hearing, that the opposition parties are going to be embracing performance-based accountability in the same way.

As a staffer, performance-based accountability tells you everything you need to know about how to work, grow, and succeed. It is a leveller and simplifier.

With that in mind, here is what your direct bosses are looking for, at a minimum:

- Do your job.
  - Leave no stone unturned.
  - Ask for help before you let something languish, give it less than your best, or worse.
  - Don't need to be reminded.
  - Report back without being asked.
- My peers have a phrase to summarize this in two words "On it." As in, "He's on it. She's on it. They are on it."

Once a task is done, we would be likely to ask you for your opinion on things outside of your direct responsibility, and maybe to take on additional responsibilities. So doing your job to the level of expectation and beyond is the main thing. You have been brought to these jobs because people saw potential in you, and their demands for excellence are going to stretch your abilities to meet your potential.

In addition, here are some suggested style points respectfully submitted for your consideration:

Be Humble. Nothing is as off-putting as arrogance in a staffer.

Be Kind. Go out of your way to make everyone feel welcome and included.

Be yourself. That's who you were hired to be.

Be grateful. This is a once-in-a-lifetime, one-in-a-million chance to make an impact.

Be on time. Time management—for yourselves and managing your bosses—is a critical sign of respect and accountability.

Be open. Recognize that your life experiences, and academic and professional training have only given you a sliver of the knowledge you need to succeed in your role.

Be careful. Your mistakes will have more impact than you can imagine.

Be discreet. Loose lips sink ships.

Perhaps most importantly: Be well. You owe your bosses and taxpayers more than your statutorily mandated employment terms—not just showing up, but showing up at your best early in the morning and late into the evening. It is physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding. You owe it to yourself, your people, and your bosses to take care of yourself.

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*The Hill Times*