

Blenkarn's riding office: dollar drain, political

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Politics and Gov't OASIS

By JOHN KERNAGHAN

During the campaign winding up to the Oct. 30 1972 federal election in Peel South, then fledgling politician Don Blenkarn promised to act as ombudsman for the constituency and to set up a full-time riding office to fulfill that role.

Monetarily, the Mississauga MP has paid heavily for the promise. Politically, he has gained immeasurably.

Better than a year later the riding office has almost doubled in size and boasts four full-time staff and volunteers numbering close to 200 people.

More important, it is helping people with a pot-pourri of problems ranging from leaky roofs and welfare mix-ups to empty cupboard and unemployment insurance errors.

To date, upwards of 25,000 names are closeted in the office's colour-coded file system, says Blenkarn's executive assistant, Mike Petrie

"These are people who have contacted us for help for various reasons or have responded to the series of Dialogue questionnaires we have distributed.

"They are being grouped according to interest or need by colour."

Petrie doesn't see the response as surprising. He notes that the office is manned six days a week and a 24 hour answering service collects any other queries.

The reasons for contacting the office, recently moved to more spacious accommodations at 62 Dundas St. W., are as diverse as the elements which comprise the riding. They run the gamut of municipal, provincial and federal jurisdiction and often spill over into gray areas serviced by charitable groups.

"One woman will phone in saying her roof is leaking and she is out of work and hasn't any money. Another will say her family is starving and the children don't have proper clothes. We follow them all up" says Petrie.

"Often the problems don't really concern us, so a lot of the time we act as a referral service. But we do make a point of following up calls like that to make sure the person has been looked after."

Petrie feels that of the constituency offices he has seen, the Mississauga operation is by far the best.

"It has to be. We're now the biggest riding in the country."

"Several other riding offices started out last

about \$4,000 and Blenkarn used \$2,000 remaining from his election campaign.

Clearly, the costs to the MP made a sizable dent in his salary (\$18,000 taxable, \$6,000 untaxable) and makes an excellent argument for the representative as a man of means.

"But its a pretty sad argument" remarks Blenkarn. "You have to have outside interests if you want to do the job." Luckily, his personal wealth is considerable.

Petrie is paid by the speaker of the House of Commons as an assistant but Blenkarn adds an increment to that. He also employs a full-time secretary and two other helpers.

Others costs are rent, telephone, heat and hydro plus inevitable miscellaneous expenses.

"Virtually every cent I get from the job goes back into representing the riding" says Blenkarn.

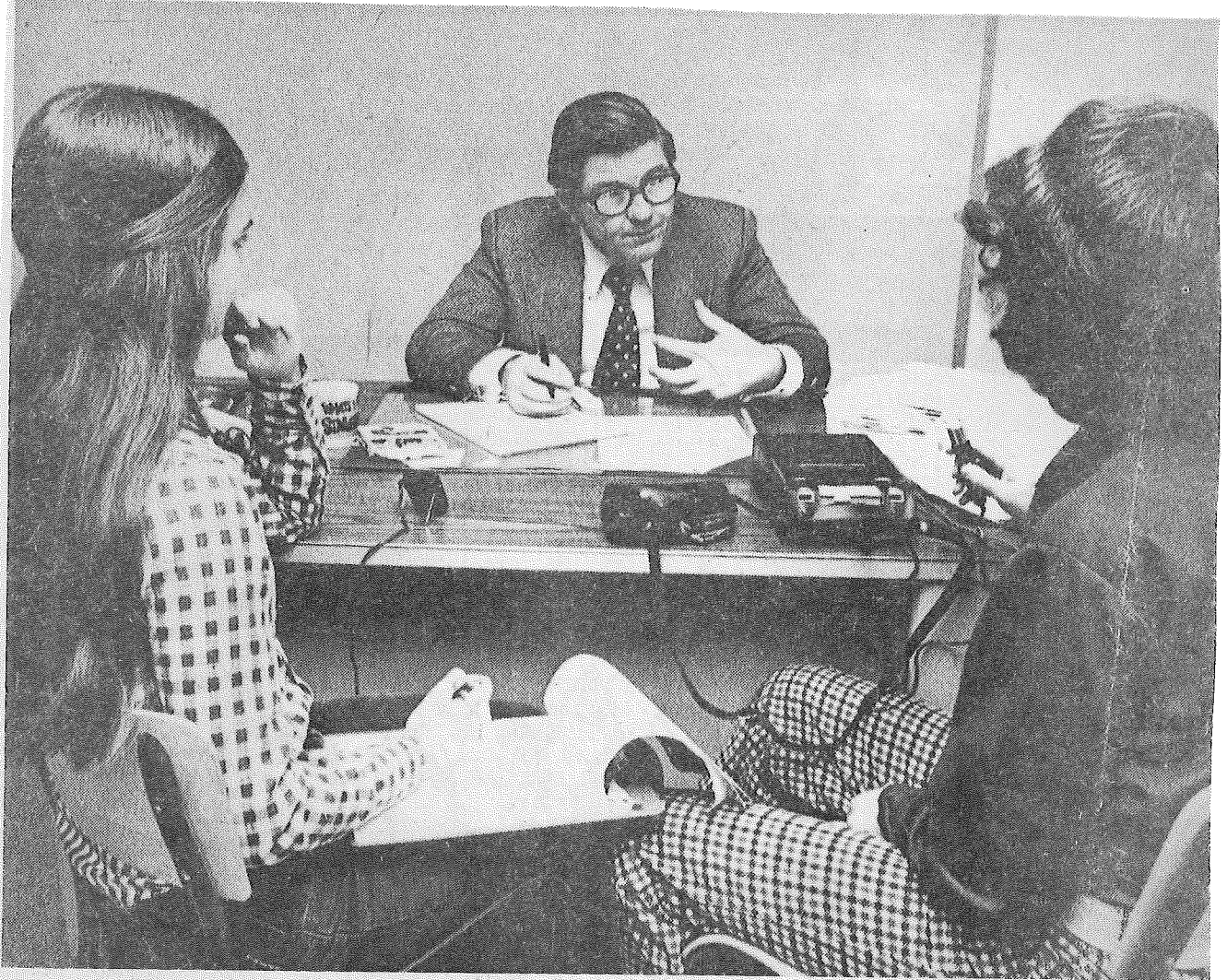
He'll be relieved of some of the costs by a bill that will allow him up to \$6,000 towards defraying his riding bills. It is expected to pass shortly.

Obviously, NDP and Liberal people could argue that the riding office's work is simply wiring the city for a coming election.

But its circular reasoning. The path to power is through people, by meeting and helping them. A representative's job has the same objective. Who can argue motive when results are what count?

"Hell", snorts Blenkarn, "I set out to be an ombudsman. I think that is what a member is supposed to do. Three people came in here this morning and I intend to help them."

Motives aside, things look very rosy for Mr. Blenkarn on the home front.



Mississauga MP Don Blenkarn mans his constituency office on Saturday morning offering Lorne Park Secondary Students Martha Quance and Tony Saunders, both

14, advice on school debate. The riding office is on 24-hour call and has been contacted by 25,000 people since last October.