



PROFILE: RANDY WEEKES, SPEAKER OF SASKATCHEWAN'S LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

He talks about the role of speaker in a parliamentary system, discusses COVID-19's impact, and explains why his province values its relationship with Midwest states

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

In October 2020, Randy Weekes won a seat in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan for the sixth time.

Later that fall, he won another contested election — via a secret-ballot vote of fellow members of the Assembly — that ensured his new term would be like none other in Weekes' 22-year legislative career.

He was chosen speaker of the Legislative Assembly, a critical position in Canada's parliamentary system that has some roles similar to speakerships in U.S. statehouses but also features one critical difference — the expectation of being nonpartisan or, as Weekes describes it, "an impartial referee."

As presiding officer, Weekes serves as the Assembly's spokesman with international groups and other legislatures while also overseeing financial and administrative policies. Notably, though, he does not attend meetings of his party caucus during session.

It's a very different role for someone whose involvement in party politics dates back to the 1980s.

Raised on a family farm in central Saskatchewan, Weekes got involved with the local Progressive Conservative Party as a high school student, attending several provincial conventions.

"It kind of whet my appetite to be involved in politics," he says.

In the next decade he got a unique chance to participate even more — by being an early joiner and organizer of a newly formed political party. The Saskatchewan Party was created in 1997 by a coalition of Liberals and Progressive Conservatives; soon after, Weekes decided to attend a meeting where a local party association was being set up.

"By the time the meeting was over, I was on the steering committee," he recalls. "And after a few weeks I became the first president of the [party's] constituency association."

Weekes was one of the first MLAs elected to the Legislative Assembly under the Saskatchewan Party banner (in 1999). At the time, he was especially interested in rural issues and troubled by the government's closure of rural schools and hospitals.

During his two decades of legislative service, Weekes has served as both a government member (the party with the most votes that holds the premiership) and as a member of the opposition party.

He recently spoke to CSG Midwest about his new role as speaker, the impacts of COVID-19, and why Saskatchewan values its relationship with U.S. Midwestern states.



BIO-SKETCH: SASKATCHEWAN SPEAKER RANDY WEEKES

- ✓ first elected to Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan in 1999
- ✓ elected speaker in November 2020
- ✓ previously served as minister responsible for Rural and Remote Health, deputy house leader, government whip and government caucus chair
- ✓ has diploma in agriculture from University of Saskatchewan
- ✓ he and his wife, Cindy, have three children

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Q Why is the nonpartisan nature of the speaker's position critical to the functioning of the Legislative Assembly?

A It is important for the person serving as speaker to build and keep the trust of members. In Saskatchewan, question period lasts 25 minutes every day that the Legislative Assembly meets. This is time set aside for the opposition to ask questions of government ministers, including the premier. The speaker must be an impartial referee during debates.

Q What kind of adjustments has the Legislative Assembly had to make in operations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

A Last spring, we were supposed to meet from March to May, but we had an abbreviated session in March and then adjourned until June. Both parties agreed to shorten the session and the building was closed to public access. We had minimal staff on the floor, physical distancing of chairs in the Assembly, and voting was by tally sheet rather than by roll call. Members were in the building, but mostly stayed in our offices.

When we came back in late November following the election, there were more modifications to the chamber and procedures. A normal sitting in the fall would be 25 days, but we only sat for eight days, and orientation for new members was done virtually, rather than in person.

Q What are examples of the health and safety protocols put in place in the chamber?

A The setup of desks in the chamber was changed so that there were single rows of desks rather than having two desks together. Plexiglass was put up and masks were required to be worn at all times in the building, except when members were in their own offices. Members also wore masks while speaking, even though they were behind plexiglass and socially distanced. Members could come in to vote and immediately leave, and proxy votes were allowed as well. We also reconfigured committee rooms to allow for social distancing.

Q Looking more broadly at the pandemic's impact, how has it affected the province in areas such as health and the economy?

A Like other jurisdictions, Saskatchewan has had to deal with the economic fallout of the pandemic and restrictions that governments have had to impose to protect its citizens and stop the spread of COVID-19. The Saskatchewan Government has walked a fine line between keeping much of the economy open and operating while asking its citizens to follow restrictions based on science and data. The increasing rate of vaccinations along with continued restrictions will defeat the virus. The future looks very promising.

Q Saskatchewan is a member of CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference (MLC), along with 11 member states and three affiliate provinces. How would you describe your province's relationship with the Midwest?

A Saskatchewan and the Midwest (and U.S.) have close ties, including family ties and personal relationships, as well as economies that are intertwined in many ways. Our province has a very important trading relationship with the MLC states. A large portion of our exports go to the U.S., and especially the Midwest. Minnesota receives the largest portion of our exports (11 percent) after China, and Illinois is our third largest export market. Just over half the province's imports come from just five states: North Dakota, Illinois, Texas, Iowa and Indiana.

Q How do you think members of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan benefit from the province's membership in the MLC?

A We value the exchange between members coming to Saskatchewan and our members going to the U.S. [through a legislative exchange program of the MLC's Midwest-Canada Relations Committee]. It is very helpful for all of us to understand how the legislative systems work. We also have the chance to meet legislators from other jurisdictions at meetings. So we know that we are just a phone call or email away from another [legislator] who can help resolve a cross-border problem.