

Fear, but not panic, filled National Caucus Room as gunshots rocked Ottawa: MP Brown



(Flags were lowered at Town Hall while Members of Parliament, including Lois Brown, remained in lockdown on Parliament Hill last week.)

By Brock Weir

Last Wednesday began as an ordinary day for Lois Brown.

The long-time Newmarket-Aurora MP was on the job in Ottawa, skipping breakfast (as she often does), arriving on Parliament Hill at 8.15 a.m. with a few minutes to spare before a meeting of the GTA Caucus. With that out of the way, it was on to the main business of the day, a morning meeting of the Conservative Caucus, as other parties did the same.

The GTA Caucus members arrived a little bit early once again, but the National Caucus meeting began on schedule, with O Canada getting things off on the right foot, and it was then down to business.

“15 or 20 minutes later there were some loud noises in the hallway outside our caucus rooms,” recalls Ms. Brown. “At first I thought it was someone banging a drum because in the reverberation in the hall of honour, there is nothing that stops the sound. After the third bang I knew it was not a drum. They were gun shots.”

In just a second or two, an otherwise normal day turned into an extraordinary one not just for those various MPs in their respective caucus rooms, but for the nation as a whole. While the nation watched from afar, however, the gunfire on Parliament Hill was happening just a few short feet from the door of the caucus room.

“There was quite a commotion in the room, telling people to get down and away from the doors,” says Ms. Brown. “I guess we all tried to protect ourselves not knowing the possibility ahead of us. Many of us got down on the floor, some took chairs and put them up against the doors so that it would be difficult to get in the room, and I think some of the guys were prepared to take action should anybody try to come in through there, not that any of us had anything to do anything with. We were all in the caucus rooms without our cell phones, so we were quite vulnerable at that point.”

At that point in the morning, the Members of Parliament had not yet heard there was a shooting just a few minutes before, across the street at the National War Memorial. Communication was slow to trickle into the National Caucus room. One security guard was able to get into the room in the middle of the melee telling them to stay where they were and to get down on the ground.

“When I reflect on it, I don’t know that I felt panic,” says Ms. Brown. “There was fear, obviously, but I don’t know that I felt panic

because I knew we have security posted outside those doors. Even though we were advised to get down on the floor, I think I felt there was some measure of security out there that did protect us.?

After the gunman was taken down by Sergeant-At-Arms Kevin Vickers, the slow trickle of news into the caucus room began to flow just a little bit more. The MPs were in lockdown in the room until 5 p.m., where they were moved to a lower level of the Centre Block, informed they would be moved off Parliament Hill in buses. When they were downstairs, however, there was still uncertainty over whether a second gunman was still on the loose, and they were placed in lockdown for another two hours.

Most of the time was spent talking to colleagues, says Ms. Brown, while a few Members happened to have books with them to occupy their time. Those who already had the newspapers with them were eager to share. There was a 'real solidarity' amongst the MPs in staying safe, and making sure all precautions were heeded, she said, but thoughts had to turn to Corporal Nathan Cirillo as news of his death reached Members.

'We had to wait until much later to find out that we had lost a soldier at the War Memorial,' says Ms. Brown. 'Our hearts are broken. Our thoughts and prayers are obviously with the family and friends of Corporal Cirillo, and particularly for his four-year-old son who is now without a dad.'

After a fitful night's sleep, one Ms. Brown says was common among everyone on Parliament Hill on Wednesday, it was back to work the next morning, joining national leaders and Members of Parliament at the National War Memorial to lay flowers, and back into the House of Commons where the House of Commons rose as one, with thunderous applause for Mr. Vickers, who led his procession into the Chamber as usual.

'I went over and spoke to Mr. Vickers afterward and I expressed my gratitude to him, but also recognized that he must feel very conflicted at the moment because he is being applauded for shooting someone and causing their demise,' says Ms. Brown. 'I have to think that though we recognize him as a hero for saving so many lives on Parliament Hill, that he must have an inner conflict of his own that can't be easy to deal with.'

As Thursday drew to a close, an important thing to note, Ms. Brown says, was the collegial tone in the House of Commons, a common recognition that although they 'may approach issues from a different philosophical persuasion' we are all here because we believe in the freedom this country gives us and we will work together to ensure our country stays strong and free.?

'I haven't been able to stop thanking our security guards,' she adds. 'I think it is recognizing how much we take for granted for those around us who serve and their lives are in danger every day. They do that to protect us, to protect our freedoms, and I think that is what is so impressed upon me - the need to say thank you every day to those who are serving us.'

'I think too the loss of Corporal Cirillo impresses on me how fragile we really are.'