Party “Inevitability” Dogma Blocks Parliamentary Reform

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2013 could be the year in which politically engaged Canadians break free of the shackles of political parties and take more direct responsibility for government policy. The “ducks” are all in place for a shift of power from an elected “dictator” to a parliament that is a citizen-engaging deliberative body.

Citizens and current and former parliamentarians are united in recognizing that party discipline seriously interferes with the ability of Members of the Commons to truly represent their constituents. Former Prime Ministers Pearson, Trudeau, Chrétien and Martin are all on record as urging the establishment of a stronger connection between citizens and their elected representatives. Citizens want that, too. Eighty three per cent of them – the largely silent majority -- tell pollsters they prefer direct i.e., constituency representation, over representation mediated by party MPs managed by party hierarchies. That preference is “natural” and long-denied by the party leaders who value their monopoly on representation and governance.

It is extraordinary that we tolerate a system where we elect someone to represent us only to have the leader of a political party step in and control that person. We are conditioned from birth to accept this party hijacking of our elected representatives but we dislike it and often don’t trust governments based on the system. The alienation that party representation produces is long standing. Recall the new farm parties in Western Canada in the 1920s that promised to jettison party discipline of its MLAs and MPs. And, more recently, the meteoric rise of the Reform Party as it recycled the voter-appealing promises.

When the actions of necessarily large and intrusive governments are so central to the quality of our lives, shouldn’t citizens have more control over those actions than is offered by a representative system that evolved in a time of miniscule government? Should they have to seek representation through hundreds of lobbies, street demonstrations, and the media in what is called a democracy?

Democracy is a political system that allows citizens, as far as is practical, to participate in governing themselves. Our formal system (“partyocracy”) limits that right to occasional voting in party-dominated elections. The limitation reduces the amount of experiential political learning that takes place in the polity. Citizens are “dumbed-down” and their condition results in some fear among citizens of what others would do if empowered. However, the limited amount of citizen empowerment provided by the franchise has supported social and economic progress in the 20th century: properly organized, more participation would bring at least as much additional benefit in the twenty first.

Why is the desire of politically-engaged citizens for more participation in governing denied systematically and side-tracked into consultations that citizens recognize as largely meaningless? The answer, set out in my book (Power Shift: From Party Elites to Informed Citizens), is the lack of awareness of an acceptable alternative around which Canadians aspiring to a more democratic system can rally.

Canadians could, with little difficulty or expense, elect a Constituency Parliament (CP) in each constituency to meet with its MP for, say, a month annually to deliberate on the major issues of the day and develop a constituency position on them. To be effective, the elected members must have adequate resources of time and information so that they can constructively interact with their MP. CP members would be paid like members of the senior parliament, have access to same information as they do and, by law, have the necessary leave of absence from their employment to participate in the work of the
local CP. Only a few citizens would be elected to the CPs – one per thousand voters is suggested. However, the existence of an empowered branch of parliament meeting “just down street” in each constituency deliberating on national issues and to which access was easy, would “educate-up” constituents and engage them with politics as never before.

With this new institution functioning, each MP could speak confidently for constituents in the Commons. Collectively, MPs (the Commons) would then have the democratic authority needed to deny the PM the right to dictate policy. Parties as we know them could continue to exist in the unlikely event that they survived the competition of a non-partisan Constituency Parliament also performing representative functions (nominating candidates, etc.) and supporting governments.

Knowledge of the existence of a new enabling institution for constituency representation must be widespread to overcome the pervasive, but mistaken, belief that democracy requires parties. The reverse is the truth: citizen dependence on parties blocks democratic progress.

The objective of this transformational model is to build a close working relationship between citizens and what would truly be “their” government with its adoption. We can accomplish that adoption, dare I say it, “easily,” once the minds of Canadians are liberated from the dogma that parties are inevitable.