



Building a better Commons committee system



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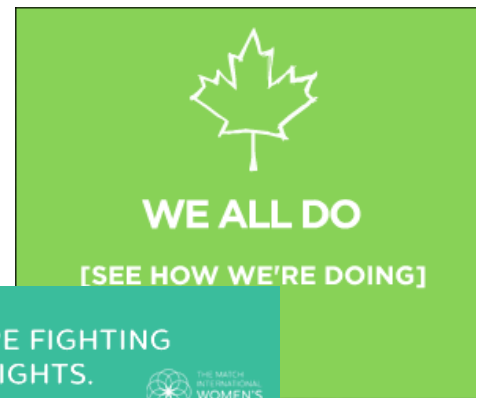
Published
 Monday, December 14th, 2015

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The Trudeau government's inaugural throne speech mentioned several aspects of the democratic reform file. The media's attention



AROUND THE WORLD, WOMEN ARE FIGHTING FOR THEIR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS.

strengthening committees.

Wait ... did you just fall asleep? Hear us out. Yes, Canadians see Parliament as mostly irrelevant and ineffective — but a stronger committee system could turn that around. Samara Canada — a charity that researches and educates people about politics — released research in 2015 that showed 31 per cent of Canadians believe (<http://www.samaracanada.com/research/samara-democracy-360>) that decisions made by elected officials affect them

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every day. And 42 per cent of Canadians feel that their Members of Parliament fail in one of their key roles: holding the government to account.

When Samara interviewed 80 MPs from the 39th and 40th Parliament for the book *Tragedy in the Commons* (<http://www.samaracanada.com/our-book>), committee work was a subject that came up a lot. Werner Schmidt, a Conservative MP from B.C., put it this way: “Question period is the theatre of Parliament. It’s not where the work gets done. It’s where the voting takes place, but it is not where the work is done. The real work of Parliament is done in committees.”

Committees bring Canadians’ voices directly into the political process; thousands of witnesses appear annually or submit written ideas. Committees are also where MPs are reasonably free from standards of party discipline in the House and can work across partisan lines to consider changes to proposed legislation.

Committees are also where backbench MPs spend the bulk of their time in Ottawa and feel they can actually effect change. Between April 2014 and March 2015 alone, a staggering 899 committee meetings were held, clocking over 1,350 hours — which still doesn’t capture the time MPs spend preparing for those meetings. Given the invaluable place of committees in the Parliamentary system, these former MPs wanted to see committees strengthened further for government accountability and citizen engagement. Some of their ideas are already captured by three promises included in the Liberal election platform — and we encourage the government to fulfill these promises:

First, elect committee chairs by secret ballot.

This ensures candidates for chair positions have more of an incentive to reach across party lines for support.

Second, resource committees better so that they can do their



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work. Travel or use of digital consultation tools will let committees seek advice more regularly from Canadians, interest groups and experts, and better scrutinize legislation.

committees for failing to act the way the party wanted.

Third, ministers and their parliamentary secretaries will no longer vote as members of a committee. This should improve committees' independence from the executive.

Though these reforms will go a long way to strengthening committees, there's still time — since MPs' assignments to committees have yet to be made — to consider further changes. Former MPs quoted in *Tragedy in the Commons* suggested three additional ideas:

Match expertise to appointments: Many former MPs expressed frustration that their qualifications and expertise rarely matched their committee assignments. MPs suggested that there should be a formal opportunity to request a particular policy focus, which would allow MPs to bring their “real world” experience to Parliament Hill.

Eliminate the threat of dismissal: Committee assignments are still wielded by political party leaders as a stick: MPs reported being removed from committees for failing to act the way the party wanted. If MPs fear opposing their party, their committees may not do their best work.

Moreover, establishing a fixed committee appointment system would encourage MPs to deepen their understanding of their committee's policy focus and invest in close working relationships with fellow committee members. The Public Policy Forum report *Time for a Reboot* (<http://www.pforum.ca/news-room/new-report-calls-reboot-canadas-public-institutions>) also championed the idea of fixed committee appointments, citing greater stability and independence.

Track committee report recommendations and government responses: While a lot of great work happens in committees, former MPs reported that there was little to no connection to the legislative process. Currently, when a committee issues a report with recommendations for the government, the government is required to respond to the report within 120 days. But former MPs suggest that committees can and should be more public in their assessment of

the government's response, and in following up to see what action was taken by the government.

New and returning MPs to Parliament Hill would be well served to consider their predecessors' recommendations for strengthening committees. Not only can these changes be implemented before the committees get down to work in the new year, they can show Canadians that backbench MPs have the potential to advance better legislation, provide deeper accountability and improved citizen engagement in Ottawa.

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