

The Next Ontario

Can politics survive even more partisanship?

ANALYSIS: According to new research, Canada's political culture is becoming more divisive and more toxic — and that means Ontario's is, too, writes John Michael McGrath

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Leadership brands seem to be more important than party brands — which may explain why the federal Liberal party's page for aspiring candidates is called "Team Trudeau 2019." (Chris Young/CP)

A [new report from the Samara Centre for Democracy](#) shows just how toxic partisanship has gotten in Ottawa. Samara spoke with MPs who left national politics after the 2015 election about their experience dealing with their leaders, their own parties, and their colleagues in other parties. There wasn't much collegiality to be found: as the report indicates, it's become increasingly difficult for MPs of any party to work together. And there's no reason to think that provincial capitals are immune from the attitudes evident in the national one.

“What’s happening federally isn’t happening in some vacuum,” says Jane Hilderman, executive director of Samara, a non-partisan, non-profit think-tank based in Toronto. “Parties everywhere in Canada and elsewhere have been struggling for some time. We’ve seen declining [party] membership rates across most of the Western world, but I don’t know if we’ve really unpacked what that means for our democracy.”

It’s all part of a broader problem: today we have strong partisanship but weak parties with paltry grassroots and shrinking membership rolls. Although political operatives (and their engaged supporters) now have more homogenous and strident beliefs, the formal structure of political parties has weakened. At the same time, the role of leader has become paramount. Instead of political power flowing from the grassroots up, it’s flowing from the leader’s office down.

This has been an issue in Canadian politics for a while, but, according to Samara’s report, the situation worsened under the Conservative majority government led by Stephen Harper from 2011 to 2015.

Of course, this isn’t limited to any single party — when one party wins on a disciplined, scripted message from the leader’s office, they all rush to duplicate that success in the next election cycle.

“Party brands have been eclipsed by leadership brands,” says Hilderman. “The leader is almost larger than the party itself, it seems.”

(The federal Liberal party’s page for aspiring candidates is labelled “Team Trudeau 2019,” in case there were any questions on this front.)

While Samara’s report focuses on federal MPs, recent events in Ontario reflect a similar problem. Earlier this week, the Tory government at Queen’s Park continued its war against Liberal climate policy by formally repealing the cap-and-trade system put in place by its predecessors. Another battle in the same war: the legal challenge against the federal carbon tax. You’d never know that Tory MPPs — including the current environment minister, Rod Phillips — were almost all committed to supporting a federal carbon-tax system less than 12 months ago, when it was a key part of the party’s election platform under Patrick Brown. The leader changed, and they all changed their minds. If the leader changes again, they may do the same again.

It’s not just a conservative thing — many NDP MPs told Samara that they felt pressured to toe the party line. And certainly some elements of the report echo aspects of Ontario Liberals’ tenure: MPs, for example, gripe about political staffers they anonymously deride as “the boys in short pants.” The Ontario Liberals certainly were happy to send premier’s office staffers far and wide to browbeat their party into submission, going so far as to try to intimidate Brant MPP Dave Levac when he was Speaker.

And it’s not like the problems come solely from the leader’s office, either: elected officials interviewed by Samara say that fellow party members were happy to self-censor in the interest of the party — or backstab in the interest of their own political ambitions. Some of this, of course, is inevitable: you can’t take the politics out of politics.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t work toward something better. Part of the answer, Samara argues, is to move power out of the leader’s office and into the party caucuses. This would make leaders accountable to the party’s MPs while increasing the importance of the formal party structure. The caucus could be

given a direct role in choosing or maintaining the party leader.

That seems unlikely to happen, though, because far more tepid reforms, such as Michael Chong’s Reform Act, have been largely ignored. In 2015, Chong, the Conservative MP for Wellington–Halton Hills, managed to pass a watered-down version of his bill that simply obligated parties to vote for or against preserving the status quo. The NDP and Liberals might not have followed the law at all — and they wouldn’t have faced a penalty for ignoring it.

“Democracy is pretty fragile,” says Hilderman. “These things we’ve been talking about as norms are more malleable than we thought. Something that’s, in theory, the law of the land can be overridden without comment.”

So we’re left with leader-dominated parties that have an incentive to heighten the acrimony and polarization between parties — and no incentive to build any kind of comity across the aisle, whether in Ottawa or Toronto. Some of Samara’s other suggestions — such as encouraging cross-party travel for committee work or creating more space on Parliament Hill for MPs to socialize across party lines — are worthwhile but may not, on their own, be sufficient to change the political culture.

There’s a broader discussion to be had about how we can build healthier political parties, ones that promote more authentic political engagement. Samara is already thinking about that. The rest of us should, too — because the status quo already looks a lot like the worst-case scenario.

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