



AdChoices

POLITICS 10/31/2018 00:25 EDT | **Updated** 10/31/2018 09:14 EDT

Canadian Politics Has Entered Era Of 'Extreme Partisanship': Samara Report

"It's territorial."



By Zi-Ann Lum



FRED CHARTRAND/CANADIAN PRESS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau shares a laugh with Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer at the National Press Gallery Dinner in Gatineau, Que. on June 3, 2017.

OTTAWA — Politics is ingrained in an era of "extreme partisanship" and unless parliamentarians tone down "anti-democratic" rivalries, public confidence in federal parties will deteriorate, warns a new report by the Samara Centre for Democracy.

The Toronto-based non-partisan charity published a report Wednesday titled "The Real House Lives," encouraging parties adopt changes to limit the influence party leaders have

over caucus members. The Samara Centre interviewed 54 former MPs from the last Parliament who were swept from office after the Liberals won a majority mandate in 2015.

[FAQ](#)[User Agreement \(Updated\)](#)[Privacy \(Updated\)](#)[Comment Policy](#)[About Us](#)[About Our Ads](#)[X](#)

I think we've entered an age of leader-centric politics.

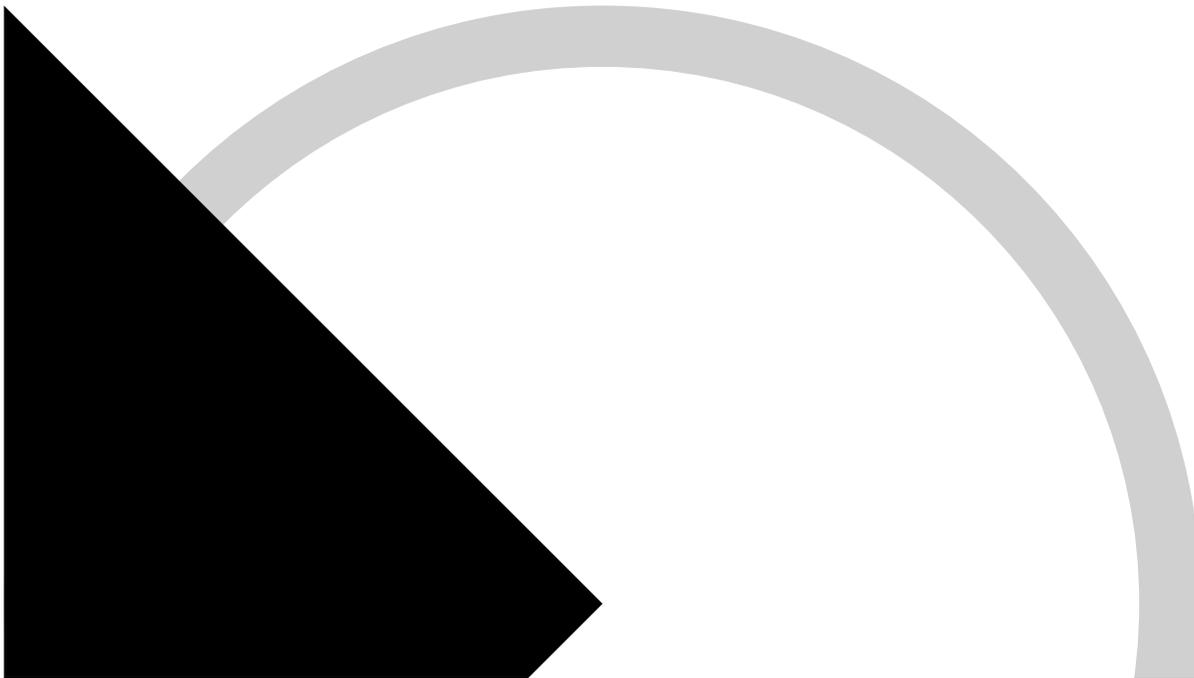
—Samara Canada executive director Jane Hilderman

Jane Hilderman, the organization's executive editor, said it was surprising to hear MPs say they saw partisanship intensify in the last Parliament. She said several MPs claimed the relationship between MP and party leader had grown even more unequal in caucus.

"I think we've entered an age of leader-centric politics," Hilderman told HuffPost Canada, adding that a new level of self-censorship is permeating Parliament, increasing partisanship.

"MPs weren't necessarily getting heat from their leader, but that they were getting from their own colleagues if they were seen to be stepping a little out of line," she explained.

Watch 'Backbenchers': Prepare for a 'nasty' election campaign



Samara Canada spoke to former MPs from all parties across the country: 25 from the NDP, 23 Tories, three Liberals, and three Green and independent MPs. With more than 100

hours of interviews collected, authors threaded the 50-page report with stories shared by former MPs, but didn't attribute names to quotes.

[FAQ](#) [User Agreement \(Updated\)](#) [Privacy \(Updated\)](#) [Comment Policy](#) [About Us](#) [About Our Ads](#)

X

organizations' ongoing exit interview project. Underman called its finding a "bellwether" for what might come if federal parties fail to take timely action.

"Trust in democratic institutions and facts is decreasing and I think that Canada is not immune to these things," she said.

Frustrations flagged by the former MPs were distilled into six general issues: extreme partisanship, useless caucus deliberations, unchecked party leaders, intense peer pressure, shrinking local party associations, and the growing influence of staffers.

An atmosphere of extreme partisanship was evident for one MP who said when they arrived in Ottawa in 2011, their cohort immediately settled into cliques. And as plum party roles were awarded and reassessed, people's competitive edges began to flare.

"People silo-ed. Like, they'd be given a role and they'd go into protectionism.... It's territorial. You don't keep your ministerial role or parliamentary secretarial role for long and the general assumption is that everybody wants your job."

More from HuffPost Canada:

- [Trudeau, Scheer Say 2019 Election Will Be 'Nasty,' In Case You Weren't Excited](#)
- [Blog: How I Left B.C's Toxic Partisanship Behind](#)
- [4 Party Leaders Team Up To Demand Trudeau Call Byelections](#)

Acknowledging how parties and partisan politics are inherent to a healthy democracy, the report authors noted how there was a broad consensus among interviewed MPs that "partisanship was really at a toxic level during the [Stephen] Harper years."

An MP shared an anecdote about an awkward interaction with a colleague from another party who initially rejected a dinner invitation when they were both on the same parliamentary trip in Geneva.

"About an hour and a half later, he phoned me in my hotel room and said, 'Are you still free for dinner?' ' Absolutely' ... During the dinner it came out — he basically said, 'We've been told not to have dinner with you people ... We've been told to stay away.'"

[FAQ](#) [User Agreement \(Updated\)](#) [Privacy \(Updated\)](#) [Comment Policy](#) [About Us](#) [About Our Ads](#)

X

Interim Strategies and Party Ties

The creation of more informal shared spaces and cross-party travel are two of five recommendations the Samara Centre propose parliamentarians adopt in the interim to promote more collegiality, and to release "extreme partisanship" tensions on Parliament Hill.

Conservative MP Michael Chong called the report's recommendations realistic.

On the topic of the disappearance of shared, informal spaces on Parliament Hill, Chong told HuffPost that everyone is spread out between several buildings so it's hard to casually meet. He said before his time in Ottawa, MPs used to gather in the reading room in Centre Block before it was [converted to a committee room](#) in 1990.

"It used to be a place where MPs could congregate, read the newspapers," he said, adding how losing a space in the House where MPs could "get to know each other and chat" could be a factor in increased polarization on the Hill. "I think that created a different dynamic."



SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Conservative MP Erin O'Toole talks to media in the foyer of the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Oct. 24, 2018.

[FAQ](#) [User Agreement \(Updated\)](#) [Privacy \(Updated\)](#) [Comment Policy](#) [About Us](#) [About Our Ads](#)

X

help MPs "[reclaim their influence](#)" in their own parties by reeling in the power of leaders and giving more to influence to caucus members.

A [watered-down version](#) of his bill became law (amending [section 49](#) of the Parliament of Canada Act) before the 2015 election.

“

I would welcome the opportunity to have this adjudicated in a federal court.

—Conservative MP Michael Chong

The Wellington—Halton Hills MP said his party has adopted three of four Reform Act provisions since the last election, unlike the Liberals or the [New Democrats](#). Those parties broke the law and didn't fulfill their requirements under the amended section 49 of the Parliament of Canada Act, he said.

"I would welcome the opportunity to have this adjudicated in a federal court."

Chong is optimistic reviewing the Samara Centre's report recommendations, but said there's still an need to diminish the power of party leaders, particularly the prime minister, and to empower members of Parliament.

Creating communal spaces and more all-party road trips is one thing, but making specific rule changes to the standing orders, to the statutes and unwritten conventions governing the House of Commons is another — and a lot harder, he said.

"At the end of the day, this goes to power: who has it, who wields it, and who doesn't."

Related on HuffPost: