

Hilderman: Canadian democracy sure could use some improvement



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Government House Leader Bardish Chagger answers a question in the House of Commons. Canadians give their democracy a B-grade. *ADRIAN WYLD / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the world is in the midst of a “democratic recession,” and America’s recent downgrade to “flawed democracy” showed that countries with long traditions of democracy are not

immune. Canada weathered the 2008 economic recession better than many countries, but can we weather the world's democratic recession? To do so, we need a strong democratic infrastructure: the mix of laws and institutions, as well as the unwritten political norms and culture that allow us to work together as citizens to make decisions.

Samara Canada's 2017 Democracy 360 (<http://www.samaracanada.com/research/samara-democracy-360/2017-democracy-360>), the second report card on how Canadians communicate, participate and lead in politics, shows most Canadians believe their democracy to be doing ... meh, okay. Overall, Canadians gave their democracy a "B-" grade, up from a "C" two years ago.

The greatest danger to Canada's democracy may not come from instability abroad, but our own complacency. We cannot be over-confident that the country's democratic infrastructure, much of it dating back to Confederation itself, needn't be reinforced and renewed. Moreover, a country as rich in resources and people as Canada should strive for "exceeds expectations" rather than "meets expectations." The Democracy 360 report demonstrates there is room to improve.

Elected leaders, for example, are the two-way link between citizens and their government, but Canadians do not always view them as such. Of the three areas examined in Democracy 360 – communication, participation and leadership – Canadians' satisfaction with their political leadership was the lowest. Canadians gave a "C" grade to their MPs and political parties.

Canadians say MPs do a better job at representing their parties than representing their constituents, holding the government to account, or debating and voting on issues in the House of Commons. Only a small majority (54 per cent) of Canadians agree the work and decisions of MPs influence the direction of the country.

More needs to be done to make the work of Parliament and our MPs more approachable, understandable and constructive. What might an investment in democratic infrastructure look like to get us there? Here are three places to start.

1. Empowered representatives: When decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of party leaders, politics becomes less transparent, less open to ideas, and potentially less responsive to Canadians' needs. Striking a balance of power between parties, party leaders and MPs is at the heart of meaningful and effective Parliament. Right now the balance tilts towards parties and party leaders. It needs to be shifted towards MPs as representatives of Canadians.
2. MPs consult Canadians: More meaningful consultation of the public by all MPs could strengthen the ties between constituents and MPs, connect citizens to politics, and result in decisions that are better understood by Canadians.

3. Increased civility: Canada's current political culture too often risks turning citizens off, rather than inspiring their involvement. Building a culture of respect for participants and the institutions of democracy will go a long way towards building a strong democratic infrastructure that includes many people.

Notably, the Liberal government recently suggested a host of procedural reforms to the functioning of the House, to mixed reviews. The functioning of the House of Commons – including how committees work, how the Opposition and all MPs hold government to account and how individual MPs are heard– is a critical piece of our infrastructure. It's important that it both functions properly and that *it's seen* to function properly by Canadians. The changes launched a multi-day opposition-led filibuster, and brought renewed attention to the critical conversation about the way the work of representation on Parliament Hill is realized. As MPs and committee consider these changes, they should bear in mind which changes will allow the diverse opinions and needs of Canadians to be heard and included, for the long term.

Ottawans are very familiar with the scaffolding that surrounds Parliament. We didn't wait until the walls all fell down to start fixing them. Like the physical buildings of our democracy, our democratic infrastructure needs maintenance. Without it, the leaky roof of Canada's democracy will spell problems for the foundation.

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