

## OPINION

# It's time for MPs to seize opportunity presented by democratic empowerment motion

By PAUL E.J. THOMAS    MAY. 27, 2019

Even if the Democratic Empowerment motion fails to pass, the debates on its provisions in the House and at committee will lay the groundwork for the mandatory review of the Standing Orders that will take place following the next election.



Liberal MP Frank Baylis, pictured with Liberal MP Sonia Sidhu, is leading a rainbow coalition of parliamentarians from the Conservative, Green, Liberal, and New Democratic parties have developed the Democratic Empowerment motion. *The Hill Times file photograph*

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In the 2014 book *Tragedy in the Commons*, the Samara Centre for Democracy's co-founders, Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, called on Members of Parliament to stop “colluding in their servitude” and start restoring the role and influence of individual MPs that had slowly been eroded by rising party discipline and the concentration of power in the hands of party leaders.

Five years later, a group of MPs have taken up this challenge. Led by Liberal MP Frank Baylis, the MP for Pierrefonds-Dollard, Que., a rainbow coalition of parliamentarians from the Conservative, Green, Liberal, and New Democratic parties have developed the Democratic Empowerment motion—a comprehensive package of reforms to the House of Commons Standing Orders that would both empower backbench members and help MPs to better connect with and represent citizens.

The proposals, which are contained within Baylis's private members motion M-231, will go a long way towards decentralizing power to MPs, and in turn, building citizens' trust in their representatives and the institution of Parliament.

To empower individual MPs, the Democratic Empowerment motion would ban the use of party lists to determine who speaks in Commons debates and increase the time devoted to private members' business. To improve the representation of citizens, it would create a mechanism allowing petitions reaching at least 70,000 signatures to trigger parliamentary debates. And to enhance scrutiny of the government, it would reinvigorate the standing committees by dividing committee chairs proportionately among the recognized parties, requiring chairs to be elected through a secret ballot of all MPs, and ensuring that parties can't remove individual MPs from a committee for the duration of a parliamentary session.

Crucially, M-231 would also create the extra time for the expanded private members' business and petitions debates by establishing a parallel debating chamber like those in the United Kingdom and Australia, thereby allowing the Commons to meet in two places at once.

The Samara Centre for Democracy has proposed many of these reforms in our past reports. Our decision to advance these recommendations grew out of our exit interviews with former MPs who left Parliament between 2006 and 2015, most of whom lamented the strength of party discipline and the futility of so much parliamentary activity. Sadly, these views were echoed in our 2018 survey of current MPs, with just 21 percent of respondents being satisfied with the capacity of House of Commons debates to produce civil and thoughtful exchanges between members. Our recent Democracy 360 report, based on a poll of over 4,000 Canadians, similarly found that just 56 percent of respondents were satisfied with the performance of MPs, and the task they saw MPs as performing best was representing the views of their parties.

The Democratic Empowerment motion will have its first hour of debate in the House of Commons later on Monday, May 27. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs has also agreed to study the Motion and will begin hearing witnesses on Thursday, May 30. Yet, ironically, one of the things that the Motion seeks to correct—the dearth of time devoted to private members' business—will likely mean that the House will rise before the Motion can receive a second hour of debate and come to a vote.

We hope that MPs will nonetheless seize the opportunity provided by M-231 to begin rebalancing the relationships between themselves and their parties, and Parliament and the government. Debating this motion will require MPs to argue for their own autonomy and freedom from party whips and leaders—a conversation that would be awkward for individual members on their own, but becomes easier when MPs raise their voices together. Such joint action is vital if MPs are to begin retaking the autonomy they need to effectively represent their constituents and hold government to account in addition to representing their parties.

Even if the Democratic Empowerment motion fails to pass, the debates on its provisions in the House and at committee will lay the groundwork for the mandatory review of the standing orders that will take place following the next election. But there is also the chance that together MPs may find a way to ensure that the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament is remembered as the one where MPs stopped colluding in their servitude, and began collaborating for their independence.

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