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'Kids in short pants' rule all, says new Samara report

By EMILY HAWS NOV. 5, 2018

According to Samara's latest report, MPs said the influence of political staffers is growing along with rabid partisanship.



The growing influence of political staffers is dividing MPs, says a new report from the Samara Centre for Democracy, with some taking issue with the amount of influence they have on policy decisions given that they are unelected individuals. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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The growing influence of political staffers is dividing MPs, says a new report from the Samara Centre for Democracy, and some are taking issue with the amount of influence they have on policy decisions given that they are unelected individuals.

Known as “the kids in short pants,” the study reports that MPs were more likely to blame their respective party leaders’ staff for the limits posed on their independence, rather than the leaders themselves. Called “The Real House Lives,” the study interviewed MPs from the 41st Parliament, which served from 2011 until 2015, examining their lives within the party. Some 25 Dippers, 23 Tories, three Grits, and three Greens or Independents took part.

One MP quoted in the report said they felt there has always been a tension between the elected and unelected people, but that now it’s “much more controlled by the unelected people.”

“As the power in the elective grows, the power in the Prime Minister’s Office grows ... it’s the people who are not the prime minister or are not the cabinet member or not the MP who are often making the key decisions,” reads the quote. “You couldn’t run the system without them. But, I do think people sometimes don’t take caucus seriously enough.”

Some MPs dissented from the majority view, however, with one noting that the staffers’ advice was “pretty damn good.”

Jane Hilderman, Samara’s executive director, said the staffing issue also arose in Samara’s first round of exit interviews, which covered the 38th, 39th, and 40th Parliaments.

“I think what stood out in this round was that there was sort of an exclamation mark behind that sentiment in the sense that it certainly had not improved, it has only intensified,” she said. “There was some division among [MPs] in terms of how to deal with it.”



Liberal MP Alexandra Mendès, left, said staffers are often living in a bubble. *The Hill Times* file photograph

NDP MP Nathan Cullen (Skeena-Bulkley Valley, B.C.), his party's electoral reform critic, said when he was talking to the minister during this Parliament, he "got the disturbing feeling too often than when I was dealing with the minister, or her parliamentary secretary, that I wasn't dealing with the decision maker" and assumes it was really someone in the PMO.

"You'd be having a conversation about a decision and it didn't

matter if you laid out the evidence, they would just say we're not doing it and that was the end of the conversation," he said. "You get the sense that they don't really know why, they just know the answer is no."

Liberal MP Alexandra Mendès (Brossard-Saint-Lambert, Que.) noted that often political staff are "not knowledgeable enough about what everyday consequences some policy decisions have." There's sometimes a certain disconnect from reality, and however much she tries to point it out, sometimes it's no use because they're too far into their policy bubble, she said.

Former prime minister Jean Chrétien-era cabinet minister Sheila Copps said that, generally, staffers protect ministers.

"You can say it's the staffer, [but] it's usually the minister," she said. "Because honestly, sometimes there are people who are just not able to take no for an answer, and ... then it's easy to kind of put the staff off to fix the problem."

Summa Strategies vice-chair Tim Powers, a former Conservative staffer, said there will always be "snots in short pants" who conflict with MPs, but added MPs will put up with them if they still have connections to the leader.

Current and former prime ministers keep these lines open by having breakfasts with MPs, for example, he said. Similarly, Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.) has morale-boosting lunches (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/05/30/scheer-likes-lunch-cpc-mps-say-check-lets-voices-heard/145431>).



NDP MP Nathan Cullen said he got the distinct feeling he wasn't 'dealing with the decision maker' when speaking to the minister or parliamentary secretary about his portfolio. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

noting MPs felt there was an inability to critique leaders, that MPs faced intense peer pressure to be a team player, and that the local parties needed to be strengthened as some were basically non-existent.



Former Liberal cabinet minister Sheila Copps said MPs have lost their former tone of civility. *The Hill Times* file photograph

“The capable caucus managers get the importance of not having staff entirely piss off the people they also need to support them,” Mr. Powers said.

‘Extreme partisanship’ a real concern, report warns

More broadly, Canadian politics has entered an era of “extreme partisanship,” said the report,

In order to foster greater cross-party ties, the report said informal space in Parliament should be created to encourage cross-party mingling, and that Parliament should encourage committee travel. The party’s caucus should also be strengthened over the leader, it said, suggesting this could happen by organizing formal backbench committees to which the leader must answer, for example.

While Ms. Copps acknowledged that Parliament has seemingly become more hostile, as “the tone of civility that used to characterize our relationships is not there anymore.” That being said, MPs are partisan by nature, since most MPs get voted in under the party banner, and are susceptible to rise or fall in elections based on their party’s support levels, she said.

“I think it has more to do with the forces of global change and how people communicate,” she said. “In the olden days ... there was a press club across the street where you could have a beer with a journalist or other politicians—there aren’t that many venues where individual MPs can actually get to know each other across party lines.”

Mr. Cullen agreed hostility had increased and noted it was odd that both Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Scheer predict 2019 to be the nastiest election ever because both influence the election’s tone.

Ms. Mendès said she understood there to be a particular partisanship in the 41st Parliament, but was only there for the ones before and after. With the Liberals in third place, the 40th had a totally new dynamic, she suggested, meaning it might have felt the need to “affirm its position in Parliament.

Committees are a great place to foster friendships with MPs across the aisle, most sources said, and the House Public Accounts Committee, of which Ms. Mendès is vice-chair, has only produced unanimous reports this Parliament.

Rookie Conservative MP Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, Alta.), also on the committee, said that partisanship isn’t problematic until it’s personal. The report said two MPs fostered a great working relationship and friendship, setting ground rules such as not lying to each other.

“I enjoy the company of many members of other parties,” Mr. Kelly said. “I don’t find it difficult to be social, to be cordial, to be polite and even to have meaningful and interesting dialogue with [them.]”

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Quotes from the Samara report

“The Real House Lives” report by the Samara Centre for Democracy interviewed 54 MPs who served in the 41st Parliament, including 25 NDP MPs, 23 Conservatives, three Liberals and three Greens or independents. Ten were former ministers, and 38 were defeated in the 2015 election. Forty-five of the MPs came from either Ontario, Quebec, or the Prairies. These are direct quotes from MPs that are listed in the report.

On the ‘kids in short pants’

- “The big tension that I see now in Parliament is ... and not just in Parliament, but in government, I guess, more broadly, is between elected and unelected people. And the extent

to which unelected people are basically given authority by the Prime Minister to say, “Go and tell so and so to do such and such.” ... I think now, it’s much more controlled by unelected people. As the power in the executive grows, the power in the Prime Minister’s Office grows, the premier’s office, the leader’s office, all those offices ... it’s the people who are not the Prime Minister or are not the Cabinet member or not the MP who are often making key decisions. Doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be respected for the work that they do. You couldn’t run the system without them. But, I do think that people sometimes don’t take caucus seriously enough”

- “I think there’s a culture of governance whereby the advisors are assuming more power than they should. And not only with respect to the Prime Minister. But with respect to the other ministers.... This is a phenomenon that I saw in Harper’s Government whereby his advisor would determine the staff of the other ministers. And that way, you had a real centralized government.”
- “[I] left a caucus meeting early, was followed out by a senior staffer saying, “That’s very disrespectful to not stay in caucus, da da da da da.” And I just said, “Sorry. I may have this wrong. I think you work for me. I don’t work for you. I have something important to do. Mind your own business.” Well, that story got around fast, so there was a war from the beginning. I saw staff as support for me. And they saw me as a puppet to do what the party wanted.”
- “The problem is the kids in short pants. They’re the controllers of the party. Our new MPs here in the House of Commons, I spoke to a couple of them. They’re already entrenched. They’ve been molded already. They drank the Kool-Aid. Because they were told to drink the Kool-Aid and they sucked right into it. They thought, “OK, in order to get re-elected, I have to do this.” Bullshit.”
- “I loved the boys in short pants, because you know what? The advice they were giving was generally pretty damn good ... and [they] knew the Conservative value system. Damn rights I went to [them] for advice. I didn’t want to screw up.”
- “It’s frustrating for parliamentarians [because] I don’t think that their views and their experience are sufficiently appreciated by people who’ve never been elected to anything. I’ve always felt ... that you have to give a lot of time and respect to the people who have put their name on the ballot, who’ve gone out, who’ve campaigned, who’ve put their careers on the line. They’ve given up something else to run. You’re suddenly going out on the stage. And there’s all kinds of other people who are the stage managers and the other people and they’ve got jobs and they’ve got work and they’re doing their thing. [But] they don’t know what it’s like to be out there on the stage. They don’t necessarily appreciate how challenging it is and how difficult it can be. And also potentially what advice and experience you bring to the conversation.”

On partisanship in the House

- “My wife and I were on a parliamentary delegation to the International Parliamentary Union in Geneva. There was an MP [from another party] there. We were sitting next to each other. And I said, “Would you like to have dinner tonight?” He said, “Sorry, I can’t. We’re busy.”... 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.”

- “Empty, nihilistic, repetitive partisanship tires everyone out. It’s exhausting. It’s frustrating. It’s humiliating, sometimes, for those taking part. And it’s alienating for citizens. But—we need strong parties. A more urbane and civil approach to partisanship, but stronger parties ... I don’t think we’re convincing large numbers of Canadians that being part of a political party is going to help them or that they’ll enjoy it or it’ll give them some benefit. Because none of our parties fully reflect the country. The complexity. They don’t engage people. Just as Parliament doesn’t, and our democracy doesn’t to the extent that we would like. So: less partisanship, stronger parties.”
- “The three of us were on a political panel on TV together for I don’t even know how many years. And we did our jobs representing our parties. And we developed a deep friendship that continues ... I did this panel with them and we would occasionally go out for drinks and it humanized them. Demonstrating from time to time your personal integrity of ... “I’m not going to say that line. That line that the party’s giving me, it’s too far. I’m not going to say that line.” It doesn’t mean you’re betraying your caucus or betraying your party, but there are certain things you don’t have to go that far.”
- “What are the four fuels that fuel the House of Commons? They are booze, caffeine, testosterone, and ego—we need more estrogen in the House of Commons. And so, how did I work across party lines? I allocated money out of my own pocket, not my MP budget, to do beer, single malt scotch, coffee, dinner, lunch, with people from all parties. “Hey man, can I buy you lunch? Can I buy you a beer and talk about X?”
- “We got together and started a relationship where we kind of established the ground rules for us and how we wanted to conduct business, and we both agreed, “We’re going to try and outsmart each other. We’re going to try and win everything.” But, I said to her, “I will not look you in the eye and lie to you. I will keep things from you, but I’m not going to look you in the eye and lie to you.” And we agreed: “Those are the ground rules.” And we had a great working relationship. But, in having that working relationship, we also developed a friendship. And that was not based on values. Because come on, we don’t agree on much of that. But, it was based on the shared experience of being young women in the House. I found it very hard to go to my older female colleagues for advice because they were of a completely different generation and experiencing different things... I have called her crying. Just: “I don’t know how to fucking deal with this. Can you help me?” ... And I can remember [another time]—she was taking a fucking shit-kicking on social media about something and I asked her, “Do you want me to weigh in?” Because I found that if someone from another party weighed in on something like that, it calmed people down. Because often the people doing the attacking are your own people, right?”

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