

NEWS

Loosen parties' grip on backbenchers, say former MPs in sweeping, new Samara report

By BEATRICE PAEZ JUN. 12, 2018

The partisan theatrics that characterize debate in Question Period have spilled over into committees, which have taken on a scripted air, according to report from Samara Canada.



Under former prime minister Stephen Harper, backbenchers saw their ability to take a more independent stance, even at the committee level, diminish, according to a new report from Samara Canada. *The Hill Times* file photograph

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Many former parliamentarians grew increasingly disillusioned with the political process over their tenure as it became clear that protection of the party brand superseded their ability to make independent calls, according to a new study published Tuesday.

In Flip the Script, a new report from Samara Canada, a non-profit organization that promotes civic engagement in politics, interviewed 54 former MPs from all political parties who served in the previous Parliament when prime minister Stephen Harper was in power. The former MPs were either defeated or didn't run again.

Of the 54 MPs interviewed, 38 were defeated in the last election and 10 were former ministers. They interviewed former MPs from every party, with 25 New Democrats, 23 Conservatives, three Liberals, and three who sat with the Green Party or as Independents.

Under the majority Conservative government, the report found, the partisan theatrics that characterized debate in Question Period spilled over into House committees, and took on a scripted air. One MP told Samara that backbenchers had to attend pre-committee briefings overseen by high-ranking party staffers, in which they were given the talking points and direction on how to vote.

One MP had this to say about the briefings: "You are told what's going to happen in committee. And the [party] staff is all too happy to provide backbenchers with questions to ask."

Another former MP, who once served as a minister, offered a similar critique, saying that if everything has already been choreographed, it makes a "mockery of the whole system," particularly when witnesses are called in to testify in the hopes of shaping amendments.

This led many former MPs to feel as though their talent and expertise were wasted on empty, partisan exercises, even at the committee level. The report noted that they felt the studies they were taking on were merely “make-work projects,” with the reports doomed to gather dust once tabled.

Michael Morden, research director at Samara Canada, said he and the other Samara researchers were surprised to learn that this trend was more acute in a majority-government situation, though he noted there's no “intrinsic reason why individual MPs couldn't assert some agency” within this dynamic. “In some ways, more is possible because you're not living and dying on every vote. What we heard was that it was the case when it was back to a majority [during Stephen Harper's tenure]. There was a bit of closing down on committee work, less provision extended to have deliberation,” Mr. Morden added.

Though the stakes under a majority government are arguably lower, the party might perceive there could be lot to lose if backbenchers—many of them rookies—are off message. When asked if Canada's low incumbency rate has an impact on the party's willingness to loosen its grip, Mr. Morden said it is hard for MPs to “assert their independence” and to know how they can “push back against the power structures” when many are entering public service for the first time.

“We have less of a tradition of MPs having cut their teeth at other levels of government,” he said. “We don't only want to reward experience, but it does take some disciplinary knowledge that's hard to acquire on the fly.”

Only a “handful” of MPs Samara talked to said they felt satisfied with the top-down dynamic, Mr. Morden said. There were some who thought it was appropriate for the party brass to set their agenda because they believed everyone should operate as a team.



During Stephen Harper's tenure as prime minister, there was a spike in the use of time allocation, according to the report from Samara Canada. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

Subtle changes under the Trudeau government

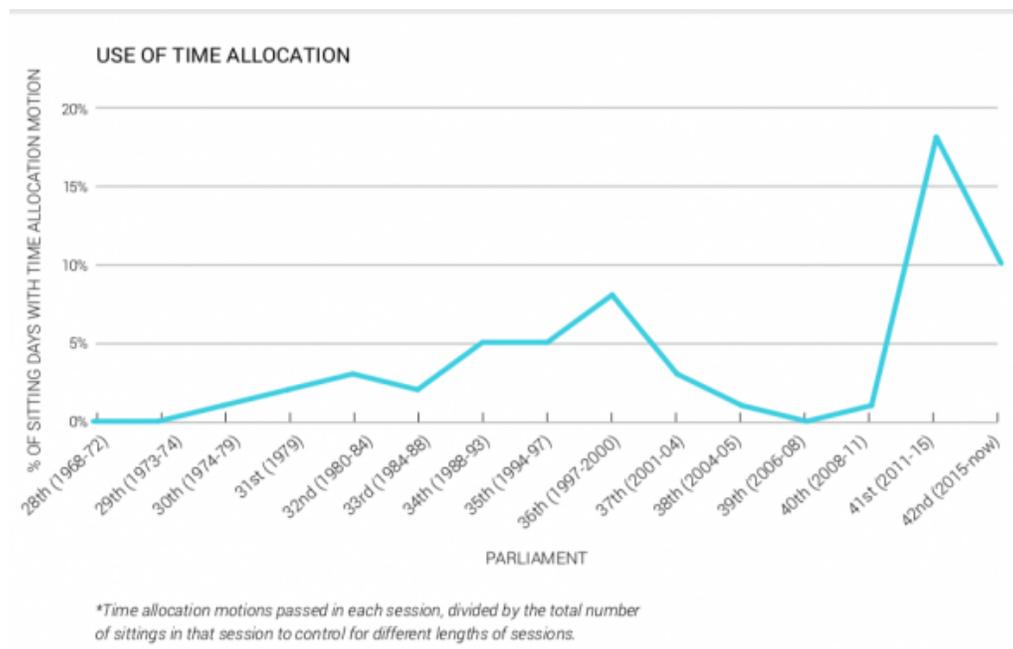
Time allocation—a procedural tool that allows the governing party to limit debate time—spiked during the Harper government, according to the report, which documented the trend over a 50-year period. And while it has receded under this current government, but from a historical context, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government is still the second-most frequent user of it, Mr. Morden said. That has the effect of diminishing opportunity for MPs to scrutinize. Many of them reported to Samara that it poisons the atmosphere over time.

“It's a lesson on how norms can change,” Mr. Morden said. “The bar you have to clear gets a little lower. These are still very much problems of the moment.”

Party discipline against some wayward MPs has been swift even under Trudeau government. There are few anecdotes, Mr. Morden said, that point to the issue that MPs have limited room to break rank or voice an independent perspective.

Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (The Beaches, Ont.), for example, was shuffled (<https://ipolitics.ca/2017/02/07/nathaniel-erskine-smith-yanked-from-security-committee/>) out of his spot on the House National Security Committee in 2017 after a clause-by-clause

consideration of a bill went south. According to *iPolitics*, Mr. Erskine-Smith made overtures to hear the concerns of the opposition parties, but in the process, the Liberals “accidentally deleted their own clause.” He was moved to the House Ethics Committee not long after and was replaced by Liberal MP René Arseneault (Madawaska-Restigouche, N.B.).



The use of time allocation surged under the Harper government. While the Trudeau government has reined in on its use, the report notes that it's still frequently used. Graph courtesy of Samara Canada

Then there was NDP MP David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, Ont.), who supported a Conservative motion in March that took aim at the controversial rules around the federal government's summer-jobs grant. Mr. Christopherson was removed from his post as vice-chair of the House Affairs Committee soon after, but after some MPs, including NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.), criticized the move, he was reinstated.

U.K. upended parliamentary conventions

In the wake of a scandal in 2009 over British MPs' unconventional expense (http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1897682_1897683_1897675,00.html) claims, and with trust in Parliament plummeting, the U.K. government pursued reforms to restore the public's faith in its political institutions. Among the reforms was a push to rewrite the rules around how committees operate, the report noted. That included giving the entire House a vote in electing committee chairs instead of entrusting a select few to decide.

“In the last couple of Parliaments, Westminster has really made some progress in loosening party discipline and giving MPs a real role to play, especially in committees,” Mr. Morden said. “It was in that environment that MPs got together and said, ‘We need to shake things up or we’re in

trouble.’ ”

In Canada, the onus falls on backbenchers, and civil society, to an extent, to stir up pressure for reform, he said, in the absence of a backlash. “Parliament is very tradition-bound and resistant to change. But the message is: let’s not wait for it to get to a crisis point,” he added.

Asked where reforms should start, Mr. Morden said that committees are where action is needed. House committees are where there’s opportunity for cross-partisan dialogue and co-operation and where other groups can presumably inform legislation.

“If you had independent committees, where committee chairs weren’t appointed by parties, but were elected by members as a whole, you’re kind of creating these alternative career paths for MPs to aspire to,” Mr. Morden explained. “Right now, if you want ‘career advancement’ as an MP, the only avenue is to curry favour with your leader.”

Other reforms proposed in the report include empowering committees, increasing the capacity of the Library of Parliament to support MPs’ ability to research, and to changing the system that governs how private member’s bills are heard. Flip the Script is the first in a three-part series that looks at how government can empower MPs.

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